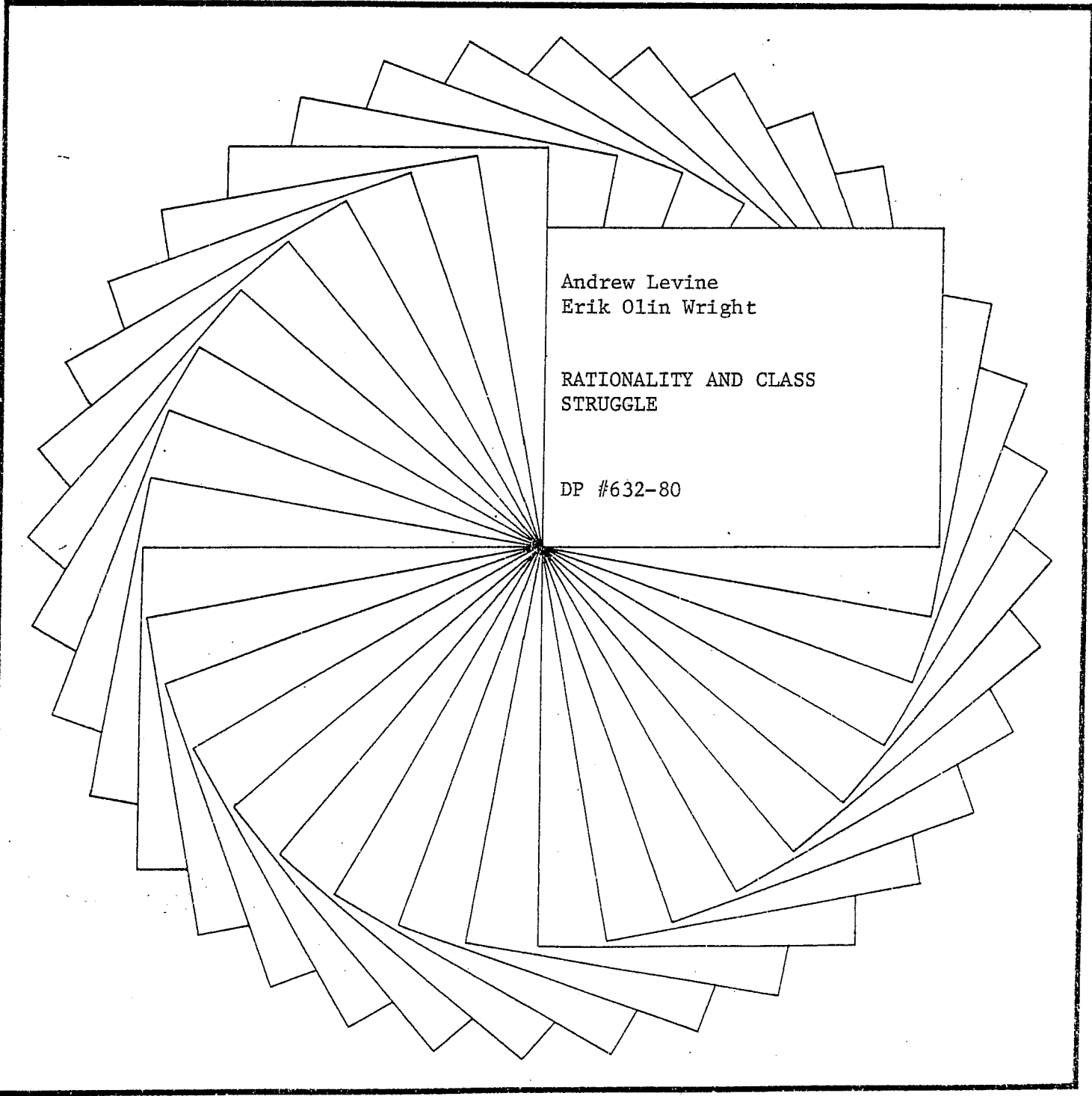




# Institute for Research on Poverty

## Discussion Papers



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RATIONALITY AND CLASS  
STRUGGLE

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Rationality and Class Struggle

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## ABSTRACT

Two of the pivotal concepts in Marxist theory are the forces of production (roughly, technology) and relations of production. In Marx's own writing there is a tendency for the forces of production to be given primacy over the relations of production. Contemporary Marxist theorists, on the other hand, have generally reversed the order of causal primacy, emphasizing the ways in which the relations of production determine the forces of production. This paper systematically examines the problem of the causal linkage between these two fundamental categories. Specifically it provides an extended critique of a recent defense by G.A. Cohen of the classical Marxist position. Cohen argues that social change is basically explained by the rational interest classes have in the development of the forces of production. When a given social structure blocks that development, class struggle will eventually produce the necessary structural change for the forces to advance once again. In this sense, he argues, the forces of production are primary in the explanation of the relations of production (i.e., the persistence or change of the relations is explained by development or stagnation of the forces). The heart of the critique presented in the paper is that social change is as fundamentally shaped by the capacities of classes for struggle as it is by their interests in various outcomes of struggle, and that while their interests may plausibly be tied to the development of the forces of production (and thus explained by those forces), their capacities for struggle are much more determined by the relations of production themselves.

## Rationality and Class Struggle

### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is commonplace for writers on Marx, whether Marxists of various tendencies or critics of varying degrees of sympathy for Marxism, to hold that among Marx's major theoretical achievements was the inauguration of a new "theory" of history, designated "historical materialism." Although Marx intimated aspects of this theory throughout his writings, only rarely did he give it explicit and sustained discussion, most notably in the celebrated Preface to The Critique of Political Economy (1859). Nonetheless, for all its acknowledged importance, historical materialism has fared poorly in the Marxist literature. The schematic assertions of the 1859 Preface, while hardly transparent, seem disarmingly simple, lending themselves to easy adoption in the "orthodox" Marxisms of the Second and Third Internationals. In consequence, what is hardly more than a sketch of a theory has been effectively frozen into dogma, immune from the often facile but sometimes trenchant criticisms leveled against it, and impervious to theoretical elaboration or even clarification. It is only with the disintegration of orthodoxy that we have come to feel a pressing need for an account of historical materialism, and a sustained defense or criticism of it.

The cutting edge of twentieth century western Marxism, as it has developed in more or less overt opposition to the official Marxisms of the Communist Parties, has tended to oppose the historical materialism

of the Preface, though, to be sure, western Marxists have seldom, if ever, acknowledged their opposition. They sometimes even outdo those they write against in professing allegiance to "historical materialism." The reasons for opposing the classical formulation of historical materialism are nonetheless readily apparent. There is, first of all, a rigidly determinist cast to the historical materialism of the 1859 Preface that accords poorly with the general tendency of western Marxist thought. There are also political grounds for opposition. Indisputably, the Preface accords causal primacy (of a sort it does not clearly explain) to what Marx calls "productive forces" (Produktivkräfte) over "relations of production" (Produktionsverhältnisse), thus suggesting precisely the kind of "evolutionary" or "economist" political posture western Marxists have opposed with virtual unanimity. If it is indeed the case, as Marx contends in the Preface, that "no social formation ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed," and if "new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself," then it would seem that socialist transformation depends less on revolutionizing production relations directly, as western Marxists tend to maintain, than on the development of productive forces.

A more straightforward reading of Marx's injunctions would suggest the folly of attempting to build socialism anywhere but in the most advanced capitalist centers, a position universally adhered to by the Marxists of the Second International, including the Bolsheviki, who, in overthrowing

bourgeois rule in Europe's most backward capitalist country, sought to spark world revolution by attacking imperialism at its "weakest link." The failure of the revolution elsewhere in Europe, however, plainly complicated efforts to develop a politics (and a political theory) based on this position. Read sympathetically, Stalin's notion of "socialism in one country," though plainly contrary to what all Marxists believed before the October Revolution, was an attempt to develop such a politics. So too was the Trotskyist theory of Permanent Revolution. This is not the place to compare these positions, nor to assess their success in translating the classical Marxian account of the primacy of productive forces into a politics appropriate for the world situation that developed after the October Revolution. The point is just that, for both Trotsky and Stalin, what was crucially important in socialist transformation, and what must therefore have primacy in any socialist politics, was the society's productive forces and their development.

The importance of developing productive forces has been emphasized by the Communist parties, as by many others; and it has inspired a political program in the Soviet Union and elsewhere from which virtually all western Marxists outside the Communist parties, and many within, in varying degrees dissent. The litany of Soviet sins, committed for the sake of developing productive forces, is all too well known: the brutal collectivization of agricultural production, the hierarchical structure and "productivist" ideology that governs the factories, the selective and technocratic structure of education, the severe centralization of political power,

the indefinite prolongation of police terror and the progressive (and apparently intractable) growth of bureaucratic despotism. Needless to say, commitment to the theoretical positions of the 1859 Preface does not entail the political programs adopted by the leaders of the Soviet Union; and it is likely that even under the conditions Soviets and other Communists face, and without slackening the development of productive forces, a more "human face" is an historic possibility. In any case, the best Marxist thought in the West has sought to distance itself from the Soviet experience; and so, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes deliberately, from the theoretical positions that Soviet politics seems to presuppose.

The Cultural Revolution in China (or, at least, western perceptions of it), provided, at last, a model of an official Marxism at odds with the 1859 Preface. Proclaiming "politics in command," it apparently aimed at the revolutionary transformation of relations of production while neglecting or even disparaging the development of productive forces. The tendency in western Marxist thought implicitly most solidary with the Cultural Revolution, and also most intent upon developing Marx's contributions to a theory of history--the tendency developed by Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar and their co-thinkers (see, for example, Althusser and Balibar, 1970)--in fact breaks expressly with the evolutionary account of historical materialism dominant in the Second and Third Internationals. Even if they do not quite repudiate the 1859 Preface, they so qualify their acceptance of it that they might as well have struck the text from the Marxist canon. Like so many other western

Marxists, Althusser and Balibar look with ill-disguised embarrassment on the simple declarations of the 1859 Preface, and thus on historical materialism as traditionally understood. To be sure, Althusserians remain adamant defenders of what they call "historical materialism." But their "historical materialism" has little to do with what the term has traditionally meant to generations of Marxists. They retain the term at the cost of altering its meaning. "Historical materialism," for Althusser and Balibar, has come to be synonymous with "Marxist social science" (or, as they would prefer, with the Marxist "science of history"). Thus it is distinguished, in their view, from rival accounts of history and society by its methodological positions: its view of causality and explanation, its concept of "contradiction," its logic of concept formation and theory construction; and not at all by its substantive theoretical claims about the primacy of productive forces. And what the Althusserians do more or less explicitly, other western Marxist thinkers do too, though often less self-consciously and perspicaciously. Thus historical materialism, in the sense of the 1859 Preface, has effectively been abandoned in the most lively and penetrating currents of Marxist thought.

However, the resurgence of interest in Marxist theory in the English-speaking world, particularly among philosophers trained in the analytic tradition, has kindled a new and generally sympathetic interest in the positions of the 1859 Preface. This emerging tendency, at odds both with earlier orthodoxies and also with the main currents of western Marxism,



has been given theoretical expression in a new book by G. A. Cohen, Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense (1978).<sup>1</sup>

Without in the least slackening the critical political stance characteristic of the best of western Marxism, Cohen boldly and remarkably takes exception to the widespread abandonment of the theses of the 1859 Preface. In arguing the case for the primacy of productive forces, Cohen mounts what is likely to be the most substantial defense of historical materialism (in the traditional sense) ever launched, and throws down a challenge to the best Marxist thought of the past decades. Cohen unabashedly sets out to reconstruct and defend the "technological determinism"<sup>2</sup> western Marxists have, virtually without exception, inveighed against; and thus to rehabilitate--not as dogma, but as defensible theory--the positions of the 1859 Preface.

Western Marxism's stance on the kind of position Cohen defends was originally a reaction (in large measure) to the dogmatism of the official Marxisms of the Second and Third Internationals. Gradually, this stance has itself become, if not quite a new dogma, at least an automatic response. Views that accord primacy to productive forces over relations of production (and, in turn, over the legal and political "superstructure") are everywhere faulted as crude and "vulgar," and as leading to a "mechanistic" politics that denies the effective historical role of individual and class agency, and even the theoretical and practical importance of class struggle. Cohen shows, beyond any question, that this kind of response to the traditional view is woefully facile and inadequate. The traditional

view, whatever our final assessment of it, is eminently serious and, as Cohen would have it, defensible. Moreover, it is very likely Marx's own position, as Cohen convincingly argues. However, we are not convinced that the position Cohen defends, at least as it presently stands, is at all adequate. The consensus against technological determinism, even if not nearly so obvious as it formerly appeared, is still, we think, basically sound.

Cohen's central contention, designated the Primacy Thesis, holds that social relations of production are explained by the level of development of productive forces. We will examine the case for the Primacy Thesis as such, and also for a number of more fundamental claims Cohen advances with a view to defending it. Our thesis, in short, is that Cohen's account neglects what is crucial for any adequate account of revolutionary social transformations: the question of class capacities, that is, the organized ability of classes to pursue their interests successfully. Thus the theory of history Cohen defends is, at best, partial and one-sided, and in consequence defective both theoretically and politically.

But even if we do not finally agree with Cohen, the challenge his work poses is extremely welcome. Too often, discussions of historical materialism, as of much else pertinent to Marxist thought, when not entirely insensitive to the requirements of rational reconstruction and defense, lapse into that dreadful obscurantism that plagues western Marxism. Cohen has given us a standard of clarity to which subsequent

discussions of Marx's theory of history, as well as of other aspects of Marxist theory, must aspire. It is not the least virtue of this book that its theses and arguments are sufficiently clear and rigorous that they can be constructively criticized.

## 2. THE CASE FOR THE PRIMACY THESIS

The Primacy Thesis maintains that "the nature of a set of production relations is explained by the level of development of the productive forces embraced by it (to a far greater extent than vice versa) (Cohen, p. 134).<sup>3</sup> The burden of Karl Marx's Theory of History is to defend this position. It is the Primacy Thesis, on Cohen's account, that distinguishes Marx's theory of history.

Cohen's strategy for elaborating and defending the Primacy Thesis is extremely novel in that he proposes to base that thesis on a functionalist argument. Marxists in general have been quite hostile to functional explanations, but Cohen insists that such an explanation lies at the heart of Marx's own analysis and provides the only coherent basis for the Primacy Thesis.

Functional explanations explain the existence or form of a given phenomenon by virtue of its effects. A classic example is to be found in Bronislaw Malinowski's explanation of the existence of magic rituals among the Trobriand islanders. Such rituals are explained, Malinowski argued, by the fact that they have the effect of reducing fear and anxiety elicited by dangerous forms of fishing. The rituals are thus

"functional" for creating the necessary psychological states in order for people to engage in fishing under those conditions (given the low level of technology).<sup>4</sup>

There is much debate in the philosophy of science as to the legitimacy of such functional explanations. They are often viewed as teleological or circular, or as elliptical forms of more conventional causal arguments. We agree with Cohen that functional forms of explanation can be legitimate in social science provided that in principle a mechanism can exist which regulates the functional adaptations. As we shall see later, we believe Cohen's functional arguments do not meet this criterion, but we will not challenge the enterprise itself of attempting to construct a functional account.

The heart of Cohen's book, then, is a functional argument about the relationship between the forces and relations of production. The productive forces, Cohen argues, functionally explain the social relations of production. A given set of relations of production is determined by the functional requirements necessary for the expansion of productive forces. Specifically, "the production relations are of a kind R at time t because relations of kind R are suitable to the use and development of the productive forces at t, given the level of development of the latter at t" (p. 160).

And again:

When relations endure stably, they do so because they promote the development of the forces . . . The property of a set of productive forces which explains the nature of the economic structure embracing them is their disposition to develop within a structure of that nature. [p. 16]

Cohen's task is to give an account of the structure of interconnections between forces and relations of production which make functional explanations of this sort defensible.

In this section, we outline the salient features of Cohen's argument. This reconstruction and simplification of Cohen's position then forms the basis for the critical remarks that follow in the next section.

The overall argument can be decomposed into five relatively independent theses: A given level of development of productive forces is compatible with only a limited range of relations of production (Thesis #1). Since the forces of production tend to develop over time (Thesis #2), these forces eventually reach a level at which they are no longer compatible with existing relations of production (Thesis #3). When this occurs, the relations are said to "fetter" the productive forces. Because rational human beings will not in the long run tolerate the fettering of productive forces, they will transform these relations of production (Thesis #4), and substitute new relations that are optimal for the further development of productive forces (Thesis #5). We shall consider each of these theses in turn.

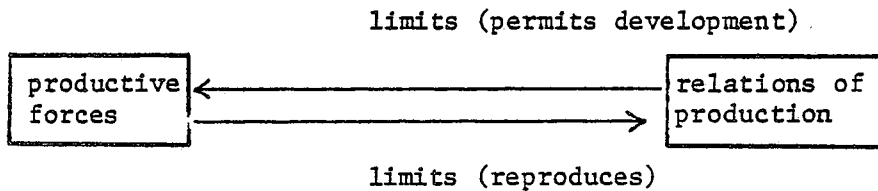
(1) The Compatibility Thesis: A given level of development of productive forces is compatible with only a limited range of relations of production.

This thesis is plainly essential for the Primacy Thesis. If a given level of development of productive forces were compatible with any relations

of production whatsoever, then the forces could hardly explain the relations. Cohen, however, offers no general defense of this claim. Instead, he supports it by citing examples. Thus:

Slavery . . . could not be the general condition of producers in a society of computer technology, if only because the degree of culture needed in laborers who can work that technology would lead them to revolt successfully against slave status. [p. 158]

As his examples make clear, "compatibility" has a precise sense: forces and relations of production are compatible whenever the relations allow for the further development (or, as Cohen adds in Chapter 11, the effective deployment) of productive forces, and wherever these productive forces help to strengthen and reproduce existing relations of production. Compatibility thus designates a system of reciprocal effects, as the following diagram illustrates:



Productive forces impose limits on the range of possible relations of production (since only certain relations will be reproduced by these forces), and relations of production impose limits on productive forces (since only certain productive forces can be properly utilized and developed within those relations).

Cohen uses the compatibility thesis to develop a general typology of correspondences between forms of production relations (economic structures) and levels of development of productive forces. This typology is summarized in the following table (cf. p. 198):

## Correspondence of Forces and Relations of Production

<u>Form of Economic Structure</u>	<u>Level of Productive Development</u>
1. Pre-class society	No surplus
2. Pre-capitalist class society	Some surplus, but less than
3. Capitalist society	Moderately high surplus, but less than
4. Post-class society	Massive surplus

This table of correspondences is admittedly roughly drawn: it fails to distinguish among the various forms of pre-capitalist class societies, and it provides no criteria for distinguishing the different levels of productive development. Nonetheless, it does indicate the general contours of Cohen's position.

The rationale for these correspondences is plain enough. A class (for Marx) is, by definition, determined by its relation to other classes in the social process of appropriating an economic surplus. Class relations are thus impossible without some surplus. Whenever a surplus exists, then, class society becomes possible. Indeed, on Cohen's account, class society becomes necessary, since it is only under conditions of class domination that a small surplus can be expanded--through "investment" in technological development and in new productive facilities--into a larger surplus. Individual producers, Cohen insists, would be unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices required for further developing productive forces under such conditions. Thus an exploiting class that appropriates the economic surplus and uses it, or at least allows it to be used, to spur development, is essential for a rise in the level of

development of productive forces. Pre-class society (primitive communism) is therefore incompatible with any level of development of productive forces capable of generating a small surplus. And a small surplus, in turn, is incompatible with capitalist class relations. Capitalism requires a moderately high surplus (and thus a moderately developed level of the forces of production), in order to allow for "repeated introduction of new productive forces and thus for regular capitalist investments" (p. 198). When a moderately high level of surplus is reached, pre-capitalist relations of production increasingly fetter the further development of productive forces, and therefore come to be superseded by distinctly capitalist social relations. Likewise a moderately high level of development of productive forces is incompatible with what Cohen calls post-class society, a society of collective control of the surplus by the direct producers. Since the development of productive forces from moderate to high levels requires great deprivation and toil, the direct producers would never freely impose such sacrifices on themselves. Only a production system dominated by market imperatives, forcing a logic of accumulation on both direct producers and owners of means of production, can accomplish this development.

The compatibility thesis thus maintains, albeit roughly, a systematic relation of correspondence between forces and relations of production. But it does not itself establish the primacy of productive forces. As Cohen writes:



. . . some Marxists who accept the primacy of the forces are content to equate it with the constraints they impose on the production relations. But that is unsatisfactory. For the constraint is symmetrical. If high technology rules out slavery, then slavery rules out high technology. Something must be added to mutual constraint to establish the primacy of the forces. [p. 158]

That "something" is the development thesis.

(2) The Development Thesis: Productive forces tend to develop throughout history.

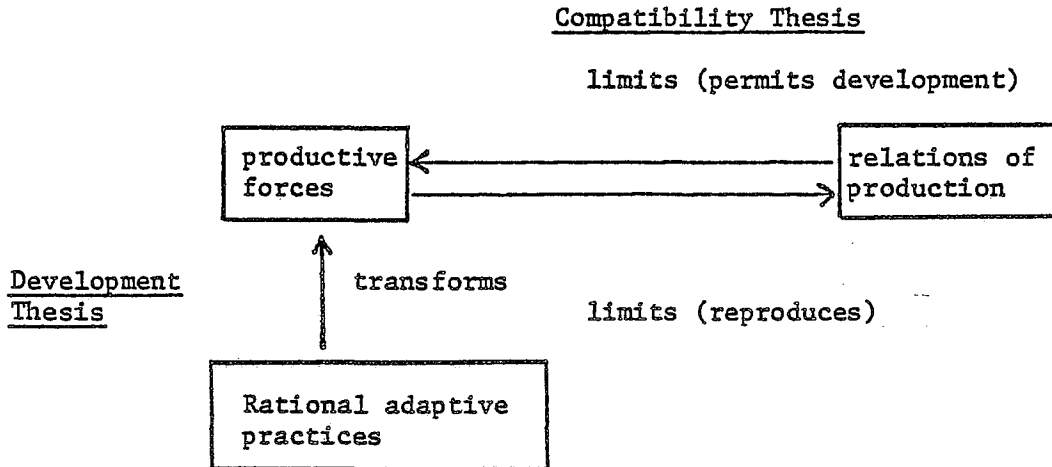
This tendency, Cohen argues, is based on specific characteristics of human nature, the human condition and human capacities. Human beings are at least somewhat rational; and "rational beings who know how to satisfy compelling wants . . . will be disposed to seize and employ the means to satisfaction of those wants" (p. 152). Under conditions of (relative) scarcity, where few if any wants are satisfied immediately and without effort, the development of productive forces becomes a "compelling want" on the part of rational agents. Then, inasmuch as human beings "possess intelligence of a kind and degree which enables them to improve their situation" (p. 152), humans will in fact seize the means for satisfaction of their wants by continuously and progressively developing productive forces (assuming, of course, that no countervailing tendencies of sufficient strength intervene). Thus human beings are moved by a permanent impulse to try to improve their abilities to transform nature to satisfy their wants. In consequence, Cohen concludes, there is a tendency for productive forces to develop over time. Further, these

improvements will generally be cumulative. Inasmuch as human beings are rational, having once improved their situation by developing the productive forces they find at hand, they will not revert to less developed forces, except under extraordinary circumstances beyond their control. Cohen argues this point at some length, insisting that the obvious historical counter-examples (such as the decline of the Roman Empire) do not, in fact, contravene the general claim. The claim, in short, is that in virtue of human nature and capacities, wherever (relative) scarcity pertains, as it has throughout human history, there is a general tendency for human beings to try to improve their means for transforming nature (in accordance with their wants), and thus a tendency for productive forces to develop continuously and cumulatively.

The development thesis introduces the asymmetry lacking in the compatibility thesis. These two theses together imply a further thesis, not formulated as such by Cohen, but a plank of his argument nonetheless. We call this third claim the contradiction thesis.

(3) The Contradiction Thesis: Given the reciprocal constraints that exist between forces and relations of production (the compatibility thesis), and the tendency of the productive forces to develop (the development thesis), with sufficient time, the productive forces will develop to a point where they are no longer compatible with (i.e., contradict) the relations of production under which they had previously developed.

Thus while, at any given time, forces and relations of production are mutually determining (each imposing limits on the other), their relation becomes asymmetrical over time in virtue of those rational adaptive practices that progressively augment the level of development of productive forces. To return to our diagram:



The contradiction thesis, then, asserts the inevitability of intensifying incompatibilities--contradictions--between forces and relations of production. The relations come to "fetter" the development of the forces. Contradiction might in principle be resolved by a downward adaptation of the productive forces, by a regression sufficient to restore compatibility. But this kind of resolution is ruled out by the development thesis. Thus the contradictions that inevitably occur can be resolved only through a transformation of the relations of production. Or, in other words,

(4) The Transformation Thesis: When forces and relations of production are incompatible (as they will always eventually become, so long as class society persists), the relations will change in such a way that compatibility between forces and relations of production will be restored.

Where contradictions between forces and relations of production emerge, the resolution will always be in favor of the forces, not the relations; it is the relations of production that give. As Marx wrote,

in order that they may not be deprived of the results attained (by the development of productive forces) and forfeit the fruits of civilization, they are obliged from the moment when their mode of intercourse no longer corresponds to the productive forces acquired, to change all their traditional social forms.<sup>5</sup>

"Why," Cohen asks, "should the fact that the relations restrict the forces foretell their doom, if not because it is irrational to persist with them given the price in lost opportunity to further inroads against scarcity?" (p. 159). Thus Thesis #4 follows from Theses #2 and #3 (which follow, in turn, from Theses #1 and #2).

The transformation thesis "foretells the doom" of relations of production which fetter productive forces, but by itself it does not foretell what new relations will replace the old, beyond specifying that, whatever these relations are, they will be compatible with the level of development of productive forces. However, for forces to explain relations in the sense the Primacy Thesis requires--to explain actual relations of production--it is crucial that we be able to specify the outcome of the necessary transformations which Thesis #4 predicts. This is the point of the optimality thesis.

(5) The Optimality Thesis. When a given set of relations of production become fetters on the further development of productive forces and are thus transformed, they will be replaced by relations of production which are functionally optimal for the further development of the productive forces.

In Cohen's words, "the relations which obtain at a given time are the relations most suitable for the forces to develop at that time, given the level they have reached by that time" (p. 171). The rationale for this claim apparently derives, again, from the development thesis, now in conjunction with the transformation thesis. If fettering relations of production are abandoned because they conflict with a rational desire for development, it would be irrational to replace them with anything short of those relations of production that, in the circumstances, are optimal for the further development of productive forces. Thus Thesis #5 follows, on Cohen's account, from Theses #2 and #4.

Moreover, Thesis #5 is necessary for the full defense of the Primacy Thesis. If for a particular level of development of productive forces, more than one set of relations of production would in fact stimulate further development, and if the productive forces did not, so to speak, "select" the optimal relations from among the set of possible relations, the character of actual relations of production would not be explained (functionally) by the productive forces. In other words, without the optimality thesis, the force of the Primacy Thesis would be severely, and perhaps fatally, mitigated. It is, we think, because this claim is so crucial for the Primacy Thesis that Cohen insists on it vehemently, even in the face of obvious counter-examples. Pre-capitalist class relations, for the most part, can hardly be said to have encouraged the development of productive forces. Nonetheless, Cohen argues, they were optimal for their time. "Even a set of relations which is not the

means whereby the forces within it develop," Cohen insists, "may be optimal for the development of the forces during the period when it obtains" (p. 171).

Since the optimality thesis depends on the transformation thesis, if the latter is fatally flawed, then so too is the former. We will argue in what follows that this is indeed the case.

While we will not critique the optimality thesis in a systematic way, it is worth noting some of its theoretical and political implications. It is an important element in the argument that capitalism is the necessary form of social relations of production for the rapid development of industrial forces of production. Cohen goes to great length to defend this proposition, arguing that only under the compulsion of the market and the domination of use value by exchange value can sufficient sacrifices be imposed on the direct producers to allow for the rapid development of industrial forces of production. Capitalism is thus the optimal structure for such development.

This argument, which recapitulates the shared wisdom of Marxists prior to the October Revolution, is plainly directed against those who hold that socialism too can rapidly and systematically develop the productive forces. Cohen insists that a high level of development of productive forces (and thus a massive surplus) is a necessary condition for socialism, rather than a task to be achieved under socialism; and that without a massive surplus already in place, attempts at constructing socialism will fail. "Premature attempts at revolution," Cohen argues,

"whatever their immediate outcome, will eventuate in a restoration of capitalist society" (p. 206). The possibility of class relations in which production is not directed towards the accumulation of exchange value, but where systematic imperatives for the development of means of production nonetheless exist--not as "capital" (accumulated exchange value), but as expanded capacities for the production of use values--is never directly confronted. Cohen's analysis is thus silent on the various arguments concerning post-capitalist class societies as developed by such theorists as Bahro (1978), Konrad and Szeleyni (1979), and others.

With the optimality thesis, the case for the Primacy Thesis is complete. Our reconstruction of Cohen's argument has, of course, left out much of what is most valuable in Cohen's discussion: the subtlety of his argumentation and the many insights and clarifications he provides in passing. But the broad outlines of his central contention are sufficiently clear. The productive forces functionally explain the relations of production, since only those relations will persist which optimally provide for the development of the forces. If this is not the case, the relations will necessarily be transformed so as to restore such optimality.

In the section that follows, we question the Primacy Thesis as such, and the sort of rationale Cohen provides for its defense. Then in the next section we focus directly on the arguments Cohen uses to support the Primacy Thesis.

### 3. RATIONALITY AND CLASS STRUGGLE

Although Marx spoke disparagingly of the contractarian tradition in social and political theory (i.e., explanations and defenses of social forms based on accounts of mutual agreements among rational individuals), the theory of history advanced in the 1859 Preface is itself derived in contractarian fashion. Of course Marx would resist this characterization and perhaps so too would Cohen; but Cohen's reconstruction of the argument for historical materialism, an argument Marx himself never provides directly, is contractarian nonetheless.

In its more familiar uses in political and social philosophy, contractarianism is a methodological program for dealing with normative questions, for discovering the principles that determine how political and social institutions ought to be organized. The point is to generate these principles from a logically prior conception of individuals (abstracted from the political or social arrangements in question) and their situation. Suppose, like Rousseau or Locke, we seek a theory of the just state. Then the contractarian program would have us consider individuals, abstracted from their political relations, in a "state of nature." The normative principles that ought to govern the state are those these individuals would choose. Contractarianism supposes, then, that individuals have a certain capacity for acting rationally in an instrumental sense; that they are able, to some extent at least, to adapt means to ends in order to realize their goals. And it supposes that their situation in a state



of nature leads them, as Rousseau put it in The Social Contract, to seek "to change their mode of existence." In its political philosophical use, the contractarian program is thus an extended thought-experiment in which the investigator sets about to discover the kinds of political arrangements rational individuals, suitably characterized, would concoct.

The same method lends itself to other speculative investigations, even where there is no question of determining normative principles. Thus as Marx pointed out in his methodological Introduction to the Grundrisse, the classical economists, with their "isolated hunters and fishermen," were effectively contractarians: building an economic theory out of a logically prior notion of individual (instrumental) rationality in a milieu of relative scarcity. And so too, whether consciously or not, and despite all Marx has to say against contractarianism, is Marx himself. The classical formulation of historical materialism, though arguably corroborated by the "facts" of concrete history, is defended, as Cohen demonstrates, by an extended thought-experiment in which the general contours of human history are derived, as in the classical economists, from a logically prior claim about individual (instrumental) rationality and about individuals' capacities to realize their ends in a milieu of relative scarcity. Individuals, in a word, have a stake in the development of productive forces in order to overcome that scarcity; and it is in virtue of this overwhelming interest that the course of human history proceeds.

The radical individualism Marx inveighs against in the classical economists is muted in Cohen's reconstruction, because individuals are

located in classes<sup>6</sup> and thus have interests not only in the overall development of productive forces, but also in the maintenance or overthrow of existing forms of class society. Still, on Cohen's view, class interests are reducible to individuals' interests; that is, to the interests of individuals situated differentially in a social structure. Thus even if the appeal is not to "isolated hunters and fishermen," but to serfs and lords or workers and capitalists, it is still, in the final analysis, a reference to individuals.

The issue, then, is whether or not Cohen, following the letter and spirit of the 1859 Preface, has in fact derived an adequate, substantive picture of the general contours of human history. We think he has not. Our view, in brief, is that one cannot develop an adequate account of human history just by reference to individuals' or even classes' interests. It is crucial in addition to determine how these interests are translated into social and political practices. Cohen effectively denies that, in the long run, the realization of human interests in the development of productive forces can be blocked by social constraints. These interests may be impeded, of course. Indeed, it is the impediments to them that structure the course of human history, making the transformation of economic structures necessary. But interests in the development of productive forces cannot, on Cohen's view, be finally blocked. Thus at the level of generality at which historical materialism (in the sense of the 1859 Preface) is posed, social constraints on the implementation of interests can be overlooked.

On this crucial point, we think Cohen is wrong. The transformation

of interests into practices is the central problem for any adequate theory of history, as it is for the theory and practice of politics. It is worth noting that this problem is a central motif of the thought of those Marxists who have, in effect, distanced themselves from the positions of the 1859 Preface. We agree with them that the theory of history Marx sketches in that text is inadequate to the extent it ignores or effectively minimizes the problem of class capacities. Against Cohen, we would maintain that an understanding of the vicissitudes and transformations of social relations requires a theory of class capacities in addition to a theory of class interests; and that, unlike a theory of class interests, a theory of class capacities is irreducible to an account of the development of productive forces.

We define class capacities as those organizational, ideological and material resources available to classes in class struggle. Cohen, of course, realizes that there is a distinction to be drawn between class capacities for struggle and class interests in the outcome of such struggle. But he treats the problem of capacity as entirely subordinate to the problem of interests. Indeed, he even argues that class interests by themselves somehow generate the capacities requisite for their realization, so long as these interests advance the level of development of productive forces. Thus in discussing the domination of a ruling class, Cohen writes:

But how does the fact that production would prosper under a certain class ensure its dominion? Part of the answer is that there is a general stake in stable and thriving production, so that the class best placed to deliver it attracts allies from other strata of society. Prospective ruling classes are often able to raise support among the classes subjected to

the ruling class they would displace. Contrariwise, classes unsuited to the task of governing society tend to lack the confidence political hegemony requires, and if they do seize power, they tend not to hold it for long. [p. 292]

On Cohen's view, apparently, class interests determine class capacities. For ascending and progressive ruling classes, class interests somehow breed the capacities for seizing and exercising domination. For classes which are historically retrograde, in virtue of their interests, the capacity for class rule is correspondingly undone.

Cohen is very likely right that Marx himself saw the growth of class capacities (at least for the ascendant working class under capitalism) as a consequence of the emergence of revolutionary and transformative interests. As capitalism becomes increasingly untenable as an economic system, capitalism's gravediggers, the proletariat, become, Marx thought, increasingly capable of transforming capitalist relations of production. This coordination of interests and capacities is achieved, on Marx's account, by the interests and capacities mutually determined by the development of productive forces. However, many Marxists have with good reason, come to question this account. Instead of seeing an inexorable growth in the capacity of the working class to struggle against the intensifying irrationality of capitalism, it is often argued that there are systematic processes at work in capitalist society that disorganize the working class, block its capacities and thwart its ability to destroy capitalist relations of production. These processes range from labor market segmentation and the operation of the effects of racial and ethnic divisions on occupational cleavages within the working class, to the

effects of the bourgeois legal system and privatized consumerism in advertising. (We will examine these processes in more detail in our discussion of the transformation thesis, below). All of these processes contribute to the disorganization of the working class rather than to the progressive enhancement of its class capacity.

Thus there is no automatic development of working class capacities in consequence of the development of productive forces under capitalism. There are, to be sure, as Marx showed, processes at work that encourage such development. But there are also, as just noted, processes that profoundly, perhaps even overwhelmingly, discourage it. There is no adequate general theory of the balance between these processes; and thus no substitute for what Lenin called "the soul of Marxism": the concrete investigation of concrete situations.

Moreover, what holds for the emergence of working class capacities under capitalism, Cohen's most likely case, surely pertains in general. There is no necessary relation between the development of an interest in social change on the part of rational agents (situated differentially in a social structure) and the historical capacity for bringing about such changes. A sustained and powerful rational interest in the transformation of an economic structure is not a sufficient condition, even in the long run, for the revolutionary transformation of that structure. So far as class capacities do not derive from the development of productive forces, it is arbitrary, in the end, to ascribe to these productive forces the kind of "primacy" Cohen alleges.

Collapsing the issue of capacities for action into the problem of determining the rational objectives of action is characteristic of the type of contractarian argument Cohen, and perhaps also Marx, at least in the 1859 Preface, employs. By abstracting human beings from their social/historical conditions in order to develop an account of pure rational action, the analysis implicitly takes the position that the structural conditions for the translation of rationality into action are of theoretically secondary interest to the problem of characterizing rational action itself. However, for the concrete investigation of concrete situations, the most powerful determinants of human activity generally lie in the distinctively social determinations contractarians effectively minimize. Human beings may be generally rational in the sense described by Cohen; yet they may be generally thwarted from fully acting on the basis of that rationality because of social constraints, relations of domination, and organizational incapacities for collective struggle. The abstracted, ahistorical account of rationality may provide an essential element in the philosophical critique of those constraints, but it does not provide a basis for explaining the real determinations and contradictions of those constraints.

To corroborate this conclusion, we will now turn to a critique of each of Cohen's specific arguments for the primacy of the productive forces.

#### 4. CRITICISMS OF COHEN'S ARGUMENTS

##### 1. The Compatibility Thesis

The compatibility thesis involves two interconnected claims: (a) that for a given level of forces of production, there is a limited range of compatible relations of production; and (b) that for specific relations of production, there is a limited range of compatible forces of production.

The first of these two claims seems hard to fault. It is easy to posit a type of relation of production which would be incompatible with any specified level of the forces of production, and the thesis is supported as long as such examples are forthcoming. The second claim, however, is somewhat less convincingly argued. This is particularly true for Cohen's analysis of capitalism, where it is never entirely clear why there is a ceiling to the development of the forces of production within capitalist relations of production.

Cohen's analysis of "fettering" in capitalism explicitly rejects the conventional argument for crises of accumulation, one which focuses on the falling rate of profit and the rising organic composition of capital. In that traditional argument, capitalism fetters the development of the forces of production because the crises of accumulation ultimately undermine the capacity of capitalists to invest, since investments occur only in the pursuit of profits and only out of surplus value. The declining rate of profit, therefore, erodes the capacity of capitalism to generate further advances of the forces of production. Cohen, however, explicitly distances himself from such arguments. Indeed, he insists that none of his arguments hinge on the labor theory of value, and he remains agnostic regarding the adequacy of the "specifically labour-theoretical account of

value" (p. 116). In a later essay he moves one step further and argues for the incoherence of the labor theory of value, thus further removing his general analysis from traditional crisis arguments (Cohen, 1979).

How then does Cohen defend the thesis of the fettering of the forces of production in advanced capitalism? His basic argument is that because capitalism is production for exchange rather than use, capitalist relations of production have a built-in bias for using progress in productive forces to expand output rather than leisure time (where leisure is defined as release from burdensome toil). Cohen writes:

As long as production remains subject to the capitalist principle, the output-increasing option will tend to be selected and implemented in one way or another . . . Now the consequence of the increasing output which capitalism necessarily favours is increasing consumption. Hence the boundless pursuit of consumption goods is a result of a productive process oriented to exchange-values rather than consumption-values. It is the Rockefellers who ensure that the Smiths need to keep up with the Jones. [p. 306]

This generates an incompatibility between the forces and relations of production, not because productive power as such ceases to develop, but because it ceases to be rationally deployed:

The productive technology of capitalism begets an unparalleled opportunity of lifting the curse of Adam and liberating men from toil, but the production relations of capitalist economic organization prevent the opportunity from being seized . . . It brings society to the threshold of abundance and locks the door. For the promise of abundance is not an endless flow of goods, but a sufficiency produced with a minimum of unpleasant exertion. [pp. 306-307]

The compatibility thesis is thus equivalent to the claim that the relations of production become irrational with respect to a general notion of improving the human condition. In the past such improvement was achieved



by increasing the level of development of the forces of production themselves; in advanced capitalism it is achieved by the rational deployment of the forces of production that already exist. "Fettering," therefore, is ultimately a fettering of the possibility of rational action. For the compatibility thesis to rest on a sound foundation, therefore, it is crucial that Cohen's account of rational action be adequately developed. As we shall see, it is not entirely so.

## 2. The Development Thesis

At first glance, there seems to be little to criticize in the view that productive forces tend to develop over time, given the rational interests and capacities of human beings under conditions of scarcity. The problem, however, is that the development thesis presupposes a transhistorical meaning for "rationality" and "scarcity" and thus a transhistorical notion of human beings' interests that probably cannot be sustained. If the content of both rational action and scarcity, and hence of interests, are not given for all time, but are instead endogenous to the social system--if the meaning of these terms is in some important sense determined by the relations of production themselves--then the development thesis, however unobjectionable in its own right, will not serve the purpose to which Cohen puts it.

Consider the case of scarcity. How many calories per day are necessary for an adequate or abundant diet? Is physical effort always toil? How much effort or strain is necessary to generate a sufficient aversion to toil to act as a sustained incentive for improvement? Marx

argued in effect that these questions have no transhistorical answers. Thus a hut by itself might be seen as adequate shelter, whereas next to a palace it is a hovel. But whether huts are built next to palaces or not is as much a function of the relations of production as it is of the development of the productive forces.

This problem with the definition of scarcity becomes particularly salient in the discussion of the fettering of the forces of production in late capitalism, where, as Cohen rightfully notes, scarcity is something imposed rather than confronted by capitalist production relations and ideology. But the problem is not unique to capitalism. In feudal society it is not at all obvious that if the consumption of all the parasitic classes (priests, lords, etc.) were redistributed to the peasantry there would have been more scarcity in any meaningful sense. Furthermore, if leisure time is a measure of scarcity, the number of holy days in medieval society--at times nearly as many as work days in the year--would indicate that medieval society was characterized by considerably greater surplus time (if not necessarily surplus product) than is contemporary capitalism.

Yet, there was undoubtedly an impulse for technical change in feudal Europe that needs to be explained. If it was not the result of a universal impulse for human beings to improve their condition, what was the underlying dynamic of such change? We would argue that the answer to this question requires a shift of the terms of the discussion from universal criteria for scarcity and rationality to

class-specific notions of scarcity and rationality. The important questions are: Scarcity for whom? Rationality on whose terms?

In feudalism, there was systematic scarcity for feudal lords engaged in military competition for command of territories. In order effectively to wage such warfare, they needed revenues, retainers and military equipment. There was thus an incentive for feudal ruling classes to attempt to exact more surplus from peasants and to encourage the development of improved means of waging war. The imperative to improve agrarian means of production thus came not, as Cohen's account suggests, from a rational desire to augment productive capacity in the face of natural scarcity, but as an indirect effect of feudal relations of production.

This argument may not seem inconsistent with Cohen's, since his account of the Primacy Thesis requires that the relations of production be compatible with the development of productive forces, either by permitting development or by actually encouraging it. But recall that the explanatory asymmetry Cohen accords to productive forces over relations of production depends upon an independent argument for the development of the productive forces, one that does not itself hinge on the form of the relations of production. This is why Cohen turns to transhistorical claims about rationality and scarcity. The development thesis cannot both follow from the Primacy Thesis and, at the same time, be a presupposition of it.

The problem can be restated as follows: the rational peasant (and other subordinate direct producers) in feudal society would

probably have preferred a society without feudal lords and military competition--a society where peasants could directly consume all of the surplus product. Indeed, given the very slow rate of development of productive forces under feudalism, most peasants would probably have preferred completely stagnant development of the productive forces without exploitation to slowly developing productive forces with exploitation. From their point of view, in short, there was nothing "rational" about the way in which feudalism allowed for the development of the productive forces. But peasants, as a subordinate class, lacked the capacity to translate their rational interests into collective actions. Therefore, the rationality and scarcity of the ruling class was imposed on them by the relations of production. Thus, contrary to what Cohen maintains, relations of production condition the development of productive forces, not because they allow for the translation of universal rationality into historically specific "moments," but in virtue of the imposition of class-specific rationalities and forms of scarcity.

### 3. The Contradiction Thesis

If the critique of the development thesis just sketched is correct, it is possible to imagine a class society in which there is no systematic tendency towards a contradiction between forces and relations of production. Or, in other words, it is possible to imagine a society in which no mechanisms exist for translating an incompatibility between forces and relations of production into a contradiction.

The "Asiatic mode of production," as discussed by Marx and others, is in fact an example of such a possible society. If Marx's account of the Asiatic mode of production is right--that is, if the concept is coherent and actually applies to the analysis of actual or even possible societies--the social form of the relations of production with the attendant form of the state generated a permanent stagnation of the development of the forces of production. There was thus, in Cohen's terms, a clear incompatibility between the further development of the forces of production and the existing relations of production.

But was there a contradiction between the forces and relations of production? A contradiction implies that a stable reproduction of the structure is impossible, that there are endogenously generated imperatives for change. And for there to be such imperatives, there must exist within the society a new potential ruling class that is capable of organizing the development of the productive forces under its rule and the destruction of the old ruling class. If incompatibility does not itself engender such a class, then incompatibility simply becomes the basis for permanent stagnation.

In the case of classical China, according to the traditional Marxist account, there was no class capable of being such a bearer of productive advance. Because of the centralization of state power, the lack of the political and economic independence of the towns, the absorption of merchants into the existing ruling class, etc., there was no social basis for the emergence of a proto-capitalist class in the urban centers. And

the peasantry, while it might have had an interest in eliminating the mandarin ruling class, was so fragmented and dispersed into organic peasant communities that it was unable to act as a revolutionary force. The existing social structure, in other words, contained no potential alternatives to the existing ruling class. And it contained no dynamic which would have generated such a class. It was only with the external assault of western capitalism on that social structure that the power of the ruling class was structurally broken.

Incompatibility leads to contradiction only if there exist class actors capable of being bearers of a new society, a new social form that would liberate the development of the forces of production. Whether or not such a new ruling class exists or will be generated depends not upon a dynamic vested in the forces of production, but upon the specific historical forms of the social relations of production.

It appears here that Cohen has taken the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Western Europe as the paradigm of social change and transition for human society in general. In feudalism it was in fact the case that within the old social order the future ruling class--the bourgeoisie--was able to grow. And it is also true that in feudalism the emergence of this new class was intimately bound up with the changes in productive forces. But this does not imply that the development of the productive forces as such, even in this case, provides the critical explanation of emergence of the bourgeoisie within the fabric of European feudalism. As Perry Anderson and others have argued, it was the peculiar

combination of highly fragmented sovereignty, geopolitical location, and the existence of a particular pattern of town-country relations which set the stage for the emergence of this new class. All of these are characteristics of the social structure of European feudalism, not consequences of the productive forces as such.

#### 4. The Transformation Thesis

Even if we were to assume that the first three theses were correct, there would still be reasons to reject the transformation thesis, i.e., the thesis that when a contradiction exists between the forces and relations of production, the relations of production will change. This thesis is problematic even where there is a potential historical bearer of the new relations of production.

Our criticism of the transformation thesis rests on two interconnected issues: (1) the relationship between class interests in social change and class capacities for such change; and (2) the relationship between interests in the outcome of change and interests in the process of change.

The first of these points has already been briefly discussed. The working class in modern capitalism can be plausibly viewed as the bearer of an alternative society, quite capable of organizing a socialist system of production and embarking on the transition to communism. This would suggest that the incompatibility between the relations of production and the rational deployment of the forces of production as posited by Cohen is in fact a contradiction. The question then becomes whether or not this contradiction automatically generates the necessary capacity for the working

class to overthrow capitalism. Cohen believes that it does, although he never provides a sustained defense of this position.

Cohen presents two kinds of arguments for the thesis that class capacities grow simultaneously with an intensifying interest in social transformation. The first is an argument of class alliances: ruling classes whose rule blocks the development of productive forces will lose support and allies, while potential new ruling classes which make possible the liberation of forces of production will gain allies and support. Capacity increases along with interests, because people will throw in their lot with classes that promise a better future. The second argument is linked to the analysis of economic crisis:

In our view, Marx was not a breakdown theorist, but he did hold that once capitalism is fully formed, then each crisis it undergoes is worse than its predecessor. But the forces improve across periods which include crises in which they stagnate. Hence they are more powerful just before a given crisis than they were before any earlier one . . . Therefore, socialism grows more and more feasible as crises get worse and worse (but not because they get worse and worse). There is no economically legislated final breakdown, but what is de facto the last depression occurs when there is a downturn in the cycle and the forces are ready to accept a socialist structure and the proletariat is sufficiently class conscious and organized. [p. 204]

And Cohen adds a footnote to this paragraph: "The third condition," he writes, "is not entirely independent. The maladies of capitalism and the development of the forces under it stimulate proletarian militancy."

Let us examine this argument more closely. The claim that socialism becomes increasingly feasible as productive forces grow seems unproblematic



enough, inasmuch as a high level of development of productive forces is, on Cohen's view, a precondition for socialism. The claim that crises become ever more intense, however, is simply asserted. In fact, as already noted, Cohen goes on to define the pivotal contradiction of capitalism in quite different terms, emphasizing its incapacity to deploy productive forces rationally, not its incapacity to develop productive forces at all. Elsewhere (1979), Cohen has explicitly attacked the theoretical foundation of Marxian crisis theory: the labor theory of value. Thus there appears to be no basis, on Cohen's account, for the claim that crisis tendencies intensify systematically.

Finally, the claim that the proletariat is sufficiently class conscious and organized to support new relations of production is hardly established. Disillusionment with the bourgeoisie, even if it can be anticipated, is not equivalent to the revolutionary formation of the proletariat. Such disillusionment may be a necessary condition for the proper political organization of a revolutionary proletariat; but it is hardly sufficient. Thus Cohen's rejection of traditional crisis theory is of great consequence for his account. Were it the case that crisis tendencies inexorably lead to permanent stagnation, it could be argued that the maladies of capitalism would eventually constitute a sufficient cause for the formation of the working class as a revolutionary class. Given enough time, with a horizon of deteriorating conditions facing the working class, revolutionary organization might well develop. But on Cohen's account of the particular contradictions

of late capitalism, this development is much less likely. The fettering of the productive forces will not in itself lead workers to see that capitalism as such is the cause of their ills nor that socialism is the necessary solution.

These arguments for the growth of working class capacities coincident with the development and fettering of the forces of production are doubly inadequate: first, because class capacities are determined by a variety of factors irreducible to the development of the forces of production as such; and second, because in certain circumstances technological change itself may systematically undermine, rather than augment, the capacities for struggle of the working class.

The capacity of the working class to forge effective organizations for struggle depends upon a wide range of economic, political and ideological factors. At the economic level, for example, labor market segmentation and the development of complex job hierarchies and internal labor markets undermine the unity of the working class, at least in terms of immediate, market-related issues. This economic fragmentation of the working class is further intensified when it coincides with racial, ethnic or national divisions. Thus, while the tendencies towards the homogenization and degradation of labor forecast by Marx may contribute to the growth of working class capacities, the counter-tendencies of differentiation and segmentation undermine those capacities.

The political institutions of capitalist society also contribute systematically to the erosion of working class capacities. Poulantzas (1973) has argued in general terms that one of the essential effects

of the "relative autonomy" of the capitalist state is the disorganization of subordinate classes. Przeworski (1980) has taken this argument much further in demonstrating precisely how the parliamentary forms of the capitalist state systematically undermine the class character of working class political parties and deflect their programs from revolutionary towards reformist objectives.

On the ideological level, as Cohen himself lucidly recounts in a different context (Chapter 5), the class capacity of the working class is undermined by mechanisms rooted in capitalist production and distribution itself (capital and commodity fetishism). And there are also, of course, the multitude of ideological and cultural institutions which effectively impose normative systems stressing individualism, privatism, consumerism and other values that tend to reproduce the disorganization of the working class.

Needless to say, there are counteracting forces to each of these tendencies. But unless one is prepared to argue that the development of the forces of production necessarily undermines each of these disorganizing processes, then there is little reason to believe that the fettering of the forces of production will necessarily correspond to a growth in the revolutionary capacity of the working class.

Furthermore, the very proposition that the development of the forces of production tends to increase the capacity of the working class is suspect. While it is true, as Marx argued, that the development of the forces of production in capitalism improves communications among workers,

brings workers together into ever larger factories, and breaks down certain earlier forms of craft and skill divisions within the working class by degrading labor and so on, it is also true that many aspects of technical change have the effect of weakening the working class rather than strengthening it. The global telecommunications revolution, combined with dramatic improvements in transportation systems, has made it much easier for the bourgeoisie to organize capitalist production globally, producing parts in the third world for consumer goods in "world market factories." This has meant that it is easier for the bourgeoisie to manipulate national and global divisions within the working class and to isolate technical coordination from direct production. The development of repressive technology has made insurrectionary movements more difficult, particularly in the advanced capitalist world. The monopolization of technical knowledge within managerial strata closely linked to the bourgeoisie materially and ideologically has undermined the capacity of direct production workers to organize production. These and other similar factors do not imply that technological change intrinsically weakens the working class, but they do suggest that there is no simple, monolithic relation between technical change and the growth in the class capacities of the working class.

Cohen has thus failed to demonstrate that class capacities of potentially revolutionary classes grow in step with the development and eventual fettering of the forces of production. This seriously undermines the cogency of the Primacy Thesis. The Primacy Thesis,

it will be recalled, rests on a functional explanation of the relations of production by the forces of production; that is, the existence of given relations is functionally explained by their conduciveness to the development of the forces of production. Functional explanations of this form are legitimate in social science as long as it can be argued that some kind of mechanism exists which regulates the functional outcomes. It is not necessary that such mechanisms be rigorously understood, but simply that they can be plausibly argued to exist. If class capacities of challenging classes were themselves derivable from the development of the forces of production, then in fact there would be a basis for seeing class capacities as the structural mechanism for functional transformations. But in fact, as we have argued, there is no such direct linkage between class capacities and the functional requirements of the forces of production. This relatively independent dynamic for the development and undermining of capacities makes Cohen's functional explanation for the relations of production implausible.<sup>7</sup>

Even if the problem of capacity for transformation is solved, the transformation thesis is still in doubt. Let us imagine that through a complex argument of mediations we are able to derive an account of the capacity of workers to transform society from the development (and fettering) of the productive forces. Workers still might not actually engage in such transformation because of the costs of the struggle for socialism (Buchanan, 1979). Rational actors do not act simply on the basis of the desirability of outcomes (however that is defined) but on the basis of the acceptability of the costs of the process needed to obtain those outcomes.

At one point, Cohen acknowledges this problem. In criticizing the view that the vote by workers for bourgeois parties demonstrates that they are captivated by bourgeois ideology, Cohen writes:

This answer no doubt gives a part of the truth, in exaggerated form. But it is important to realize that it is not the whole truth. For it neglects the costs and difficulties of carrying through a socialist transformation. Workers are not so benighted as to be helpless dupes of bourgeois ideology, nor all so uninformed as to be unaware of the size of the socialist project. Marxist tradition expects revolution only in crisis, not because then alone will workers realize what burden capitalism puts upon them, but because when the crisis is bad enough the dangers of embarking on a socialist alternative become comparatively tolerable. [p. 245]

This comment, however, is not followed up in the rest of the book, nor integrated into Cohen's account of the specific contradiction of advanced capitalism. It could well be that capitalism is wasteful and irrationally imposes unnecessary toil on workers; but this is hardly equivalent to a condition of deep crisis where the costs of revolutionary assault become "comparatively tolerable."

The problem of the costs of the revolutionary process raises an additional issue: the famous "free rider problem." On the basis of a theory of rationality which equates rational action with a simple means-ends calculus of costs and benefits, it is very difficult to see why individuals would ever participate in revolutionary struggles, since with very rare exceptions the benefits from revolutionary change accrue to a much broader range of people than actually participated in the revolution. Certainly this is the case in socialist revolutions, where the social changes launched by the revolution are intended to benefit the entire working class, not just the revolutionary militants.

The free rider problem disappears as soon as it is understood that people participate in revolutionary struggles not simply for individual-instrumental reasons, but for expressive reasons as well. Struggles are not simply means for achieving goals (although they are that as well), but processes which enable people to express values, solidarities, anger, ideologies. If people are committed to values which can only be expressed through struggle, then it is impossible to be a bystander and still receive the "benefits" from the struggle.

The issue then becomes whether or not the fettering of the forces of production is a necessary and sufficient condition for the production of such expressive/revolutionary motivations. Cohen has provided an argument for why the fettering of the forces of production would make an individual rationally want to change the society, but he has not provided any real arguments for why fettering would produce the necessary motivations for individuals to make individual-instrumental sacrifices to obtain that objective. Except in the extreme case where workers literally have "nothing to lose but their chains," a theory of such motivations is needed. There seems little prospect that such a theory can be deduced from an account of the forces of production.

In Cohen's defense, it should be noted that the productive forces undoubtedly do play some role in determining the costs of revolutionary struggle. One reason that revolutions have tended to follow in the wake of major wars is precisely that wars tend to undermine the repressive capacity of defeated states, and thus to reduce the costs of undertaking

revolutionary activity. And the defeat of a state at war is, at least in some cases, linked to the stagnation of its productive forces, relative to those of other states. The problem at hand, however, is not whether the fettering of the productive forces has some effect on these issues, but rather whether a general theory of the costs of a revolutionary struggle to transform society can be derived directly from an account of the level of development of productive forces. We believe that in general it cannot.

Particularly in advanced capitalism, even with fettered productive forces, it is not at all clear why the repressive capacity of the state should decline, why it should lose the capacity to retain the loyalty of the police and military in the face of social conflict. It is even less clear why the irrational deployment of the productive forces should generate incentives for individuals to risk their lives, or even their standards of living for a period of time, in order to be "lifted from the curse of Adam." Workers may well come to believe that socialism would be in their interest, but this does not imply that either individually or collectively they will believe that it is in their interest to suffer the costs of destroying capitalism.

The transformation thesis, then, is questionable because (a) even if the working class has a rational interest in transforming capitalism owing to the fettering of the productive forces, it will not necessarily recognize capitalism as such as the cause of this fettering;

(b) even if workers in general come to understand that capitalist relations of production are the cause of stagnation, the working class



may lack the organizational and political capacity to struggle effectively for a qualitative transformation of capitalism; and (c) even if the working class has the political capacity to achieve a socialist revolution, the costs of such a revolutionary process may be intolerably high even under crisis conditions. This is not to say that a socialist transformation is impossible, but simply that the theory of socialist revolution cannot be derived from an account of the fettering of the productive forces.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To reject the Primacy Thesis is not to reject the importance of technological development in a theory of social change. Technological development is surely a critical factor for opening up new historical possibilities; and a specification of the level and type of technological development undoubtedly helps in defining the range of possible alternatives to the existing social order. As Marx and Cohen contend, the fettering of the rational development and deployment of a society's productive capacity is crucially important for any explanation of revolutionary change.

What we would deny is the contention that explanatory primacy, in the sense Cohen explains, should be accorded to the productive forces. At the very least, historical materialism, as Marx sketches it in the 1859 Preface and as Cohen reconstructs it, must be supplemented by a

theory of class capacities. Such a theory, if the main lines of western Marxism throughout the present century are sound, must be based directly on an analysis of the development of social relations of production, the state and ideology.

Socialist political strategies must contend directly with the obstacles in the way of developing appropriately revolutionary class capacities: the institutional form of the capitalist state, divisions within the working class and between that class and its potential allies, and mechanisms of ideological domination and deflection. Such obstacles are irreducible to the forces of production, and thus the fettering of those forces in no way ensures the eventual erosion of these obstacles to working class capacities.

Cohen's book thus lays down a political as well as a theoretical challenge. A revolutionary theory which sees the building of working class capacities as an inevitable outcome of technological development, and which fails to understand the specificity of the role of social structural constraints in the formation of class capacities, will, we think, be incapable of informing revolutionary practice constructively. The "orthodoxy" Cohen has reconstructed and defended is, in our view, ultimately inadequate politically, as well as theoretically, whatever its roots in Marx's writings. Western Marxism, however obscurely, has long recognized these inadequacies, and attempted to correct for them. Whether the best Marxist thought of this century, in any of its very different varieties, has been successful in this endeavor is another

matter. What Cohen has done, in effect, is to have made the case for orthodoxy as forcefully and lucidly as can be made. It remains for those of us who are sympathetic to what we take to be the advances registered in the Marxism of this century to respond with equal force and lucidity.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Other recent work elaborating similar positions, although in a less systematic and sophisticated way, includes McMurtry (1978) and Shaw (1978).

<sup>2</sup>Not "economic determinism," as is often supposed. On Cohen's account, the productive forces that are accorded primacy are not, strictly speaking, part of the economy.

<sup>3</sup>In chapters 1 and 2, Cohen provides a lucid gloss on these key notions of historical materialism. Roughly, "productive forces" (Produktivkräfte) designates the technical organization of the labor process; while "relations of production" (Produktionsverhältnisse) designates forms of real social ownership and control.

<sup>4</sup>On functional explanation in social science, see Stinchcombe (1968), and Cohen's own discussion in chapters 9 and 10.

<sup>5</sup>Marx to Annenkov, 23 Dec. 1846, cited in Cohen, 159.

<sup>6</sup>As Cohen argues in Chapter 2, the sorting of individuals into social classes is itself a necessary feature of the production process under conditions of relative scarcity. That human societies contain classes is not, for Marx, an empirical observation, but rather an analytical construct deriving from the Marxian analysis of the production process wherever there is an economic "surplus."

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of the status of functional arguments in Cohen's analysis, see Jon Elster (1980) and Cohen's reply (1980).

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