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Theories of history revisited

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SINCE I became politically conscious, I have been fascinated by theories of history. It was this attraction that led to the enlargement of my research and teaching engagements at the University of Calabar in the late 1970s to include History and Philosophy of Science. It was also about the same time (1977-1981) that I came across a number of books on theories of history, which I now believe made a substantial ideological impact on me, and helped shape and deepen my interest in Marxism.

The books in question included: *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, edited by Fritz Stern; *What is History?*, by Edward Hallet Carr; *Understanding History (Marxist Essays)*, by George Novack; *What happened in history?*, by Gordon Childe; and *Karl Marx's Theory of History* by G.A. Cohen. My spouse and I had our own copies of the first four, but the last one was always borrowed from the University Library. And the book was my favourite, at the time. I lost access to this interesting intellectual companion when my spouse and I were dismissed from the University in September 1978.

I searched for Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History* for almost 26 years. No success. Then, a couple of months ago, a friend and collaborator sent me a copy of the expanded edition of the book, published five years ago. As a bonus she added two other recent books by Cohen: *Self-ownership, freedom and equality* and *If you're an egalitarian, how come you're so rich?* Interestingly, some aspects of the subject-matter of the "main" book are taken up, elaborated, and simplified in the bonuses. I commend the three books, published by the Oxford University Press, to readers.

There would not have been any need for the present article if the history book I received was just another copy of the book I lost. And there would not have been any need for an article if the new book is a minimally revised edition of the

old. I would just have re-acquainted myself with the content - and left the matter there. I would also not have found any need for this piece if what I received was a revisionist exercise, abandonment of Marxism, in the manner of some of my comrades who have suddenly seen the "truth" through the "democracy" of the new imperialism, globalisation, neoliberalism, post modernism and ethnic and religious fundamentalism.

What I saw was that the expanded edition of *Karl Marx's Theory of History* is simultaneously a critical re-evaluation of the author's key propositions of *Historical Materialism (Marx' Theory of History)* and, *ipso facto*, a re-evaluation of his own former understanding of the theory-embodied in the first edition of the book published 26 years ago. The result is a stout defence of the theory against opponents and vulgar supporters alike. Put differently, Cohen, in the new edition, defended Marx's theory of history against opponents by criticising those "supporters" who advertise superficial understanding and mount vulgar defences. He calls his *method Analytical Marxism*. That is the essence of the book, and that is the reason for this piece.

To appreciate *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, either in its original edition, or its expanded version, you may need, at least, a summary of George Hegel's key propositions on history and historical "progress". This is so because in Hegel you find the culmination and finest representative of centuries of European idealist philosophies of history. And *Marx's theory of history* is, in a sense, a critique of Hegelianism.

We may paraphrase the key propositions of Hegel's (and Hegelian) philosophy of history as follows: "All forward movement in history has been double-edged, since the creation of the new inescapably

entailed the destruction and transcendence of the old, its particular virtues included; social progress has not followed a straight line, but a complicated path with many lapses and detours; regress has mingled with progress, and a certain price, sometimes a very heavy one, has been exacted for every advance; historical progress did not come about harmoniously or peacefully, but through work, struggle, strife and opposition; humankind, the visible or apparent maker of history, is a mere instrument in the hands of the Absolute Idea, the motive force of history".

George Novack, an American Marxist thinker and writer, illustrated the above this way: "History is full of irony. Although the Heads of States apply definite policies, and peoples and individuals consciously pursue their own aims, historical actuality does not accord with their plan. The course and outcome of history is determined by internal necessities independent of the will and consciousness of any of its institutional or personal agencies. Humankind proposes, the historical necessity of the idea disposes".

I think Novack's illustration, together with the propositions of Hegel's philosophy of history outlined above is a fair summary of idealist philosophy of history at the Hegelian stage, that is, at the finest stage of its development. All idealist philosophers after Hegel - including the brightest and most famous of them - merely degenerated from the Hegelian height. I doubt if there is today any philosopher in the Hegelian School.

Now, a student of philosophy, coming in contact with historical materialism, that is, Marxist theory of history, for the first time, may go away with the conclusion that Karl Marx's theory was a mere development of Hegelianism - since dialectics is at the core

of both of them. Yes; dialectics is central in Hegelianism and historical materialism. But the question is: Dialectics (movement) of what? That is where the difference is, and it is a fundamental one.

Karl Marx's clearest statement of his theory of history is embodied in his preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* which he wrote in 1859. Because of its trenchant content, the preface became better known than the main book. It is, arguably, the most quoted and cited passage in Marx's work, beating even the electrifying passages in the Communist Manifesto. I am sure that most Marxists, including many acclaimed ones, have not read, or even seen, the main text of Marx's book, which, itself, is a sort of introduction to *Marx's Capital*, his major work on Economics, or Political Economy, as he preferred to call the discipline.

Following G.A. Cohen, the key propositions of historical materialism can be listed. The first four are taken together. *One*: the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. *Two*: It is not the consciousness of human beings that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness. *Three*: No social formation ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed. *Four*: New and higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself.

The last two propositions can also be taken together. *Five*: Therefore, humankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since "looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation". *Six*: When relations of production, from being

catalysts for the development of forces of production, become their fetters, then the stage is set for a social revolution to transform these relations.

These are well known propositions. Revisiting them, I see no problems with the first two. And I don't think Cohen has any problems with them either. The problem is with the last four propositions, or rather with the way Marxists have tended to interpret and defend them. Cohen raised a number of questions, and made some critical comments which I, here, take the liberty to paraphrase and simplify. Did the Russian socialist revolution of 1917 refute any of the four propositions, given that Russia, at the time of the revolution, was an underdeveloped capitalist country with room for further development of capitalism?

Furthermore, in his theses about productive forces, relations of production, social transformation, etc was Karl Marx referring to single countries or regions embracing several countries? Given propositions three and four, if what took place in 1917 was a socialist revolution would that not have been a refutation of historical materialism and therefore an embarrassment of Marxists? On the other hand, if what took place in 1917 was not a socialist revolution (because it was a deviation from some core proposition of historical materialism) why did Marxists expect and hope (as many of them did) that the "socialist" experiment would succeed?

Cohen's 442-page book is divided into 15 chapters, excluding the forward to the first edition, the introduction to the expanded edition, and two appendices. I found the four sections not given the status of "chapter to be as important as the chapters. The forward says that the book "defends historical materialism by offering arguments in its favour, but more by presenting the theory in what I hope is an attractive form". In Chapter XV, titled *Marxism after the collapse of the Soviet Union*, Cohen boldly argues that the "demise of the socialism that covered a large part of the earth's surface when this book was first published does not challenge historical materialism, but, if anything, confirms it".