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The Personal, the Political, and the Intellectual

By William Eaton

Review of ***Finding Oneself in the Other*** by G.A. Cohen (Princeton University Press, 2013). *N.B.: This is an abridged version; for more, see zeteojournal.com/2013/03/15/g-a-cohen*

Finding Oneself is an engaging and demoralizing collection of occasional pieces by the late G.A. (Jerry) Cohen, who was a leading Oxford University political philosopher and the author of several more ambitious works, including *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*; *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (a moral argument for socialism). In spite or because of his combativeness, Cohen seems also to have had a rare talent for developing allies, and I have been told that even in the wake of Cohen's death (in 2009) political philosophy at Oxford remained tightly controlled by Cohen disciples. Presumably *Finding Oneself* was published in Cohen's honor and for his league. May it not seem only reckless of me, an outsider ("the Other"), to offer some Oxford-philosophy-independent views of the moments in this book that piqued my interest.

Personal, Political, Intellectual

As a Jewish young man come from Montreal to Oxford in 1961, Cohen was quickly sent to see Isaiah Berlin, the reigning Jewish thinker. This was the great chance of his life because Berlin took Cohen on and got him his first job (as a professor at the University College London at age 23). Cohen's account indicates that Berlin did this first and foremost because

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Cohen was a fellow Jew, and notwithstanding that their approaches to Marx and Marxism were, superficially at least, radically opposed. Cohen was a red diaper baby (he grew up in a working-class, communist, pro-Soviet family), and he became, in the United Kingdom, a leading academic proponent of progressive, socialist policies. Berlin was the son of a Russian timber magnate. His father moved the family to England to escape the Soviet Union and anti-Semitism. Isaiah then made his reputation as one of the sharpest spear carriers in the very well-financed Cold War battle to discredit Marxist thinking and socialist ideals more generally.

The first essay in the volume, "Isaiah's Marx, and Mine," offers a spirited, indeed inspiring defense of Marx's work, or of Cohen's reading of Marx's work. And with this comes a simultaneously respectful and aggressive critique of Berlin's reading. "To respond fully to Isaiah's vision of Marx I would have to measure it against my own," Cohen writes, "but I have never formed a clear image of Marx's character. I lack what Isaiah has: a feeling for the nature of the man, a strong sense of what he was like, of a sort that I can have of people only if I have actually met them, or if they have revealed themselves in diaries or in letters." (Which Marx did not.)

It is odd to imagine a leading a Marxist philosopher being disinterested in the biography of a thinker. From a Marxist point of view our ideologies—Isaiah Berlin's, Jerry Cohen's, and William Eaton's included—are outgrowths of our economic and social roles, and thus what is the point of pretending to study these ideas in the abstract as if they were not products of these roles and as if our own reactions were not products of our own roles? I have been yet less a student of Marx's personality or biography than Cohen, but, based on my study of other philosophers (to say nothing of self-observations), I am sure that social and psychological forces had a tremendous effect on Marx's work, and that in his pages about alienation and wage slavery and about needs human and economic, Marx was speaking from the heart, and indeed had found the best way he knew how to unburden himself of quite personal feelings. ("Poverty is the passive bond which leads man to experience a need for the greatest wealth, the other person."[*]) I would go further and propose that without this connection between the personal, the political, and the intellectual, Marx's work would not have had the passion that it does and would not reach our own hearts.

[*] From the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. See also Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man*, chapter 4, part 2. (*Marx's Concept of Man; with a Translation from Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, by T. B. Bottomore*)

Personally, and as the Executive Editor of *Zeteo*, I am interested in thinkers exploring the connections between their theories and their psychology, biography (social class included), and circumstances (economic and political included). Such works might have more "truth" in them than works that would divorce ideas from anything but their intellectual context, as if theories (including $e=mc^2$) lived or died in some context-independent empyrean. This is a large claim, and it would take at least another essay to recall others', Marx-inspired explorations in the sociology of knowledge and to explore what I mean by "truth." For the moment I will simply add that if a writer should somehow "succeed" in writing of ideas that do not respond to or take off from his personal struggles, fears, and dreams, the resulting work will be of academic interest at best.

I would stress a paradox here. We would have our thinkers be "objective." Nietzsche may be right that this is a false hope (there are no facts, only interpretations), but I would call attention to the extent to which it is doubly false because, were the ideal achieved, the resulting work would be stillborn. In not connecting to the writer's self, the work would not be able to connect to our selves. It is part of Marx's genius—and of Wittgenstein's, for example—that even while not speaking personally, they let us feel their passion, and to feel that it is personal or has a personal side, a personal depth.

Rescuing Conservatism

Cohen's essay on "Rescuing Conservatism" offers an interesting example of this point; indeed, this article is what led me to write the lines above. "Rescuing Conservatism" begins with such life and passion as Cohen writes about his attachment to Oxford's All Soul's College. But then the piece loses its way as Cohen evaluates his argument as a proposition within a set of academic ethical categories (e.g., "value-maximizing consequentialism"). At the outset and toward the end the essay engages us and seems quite plausible because it is based in Cohen's sentimentality and his desire to preserve the particular world in which he has taken root and flourished. In the middle, when we are given a virtuoso display of the techniques and terminology of Oxford philosophy, the argument seems too emotionally disconnected to be plausible.

For both its strengths and weaknesses, "Rescuing Conservatism" (Chapter Eight of *Finding Oneself*) deserves a review all to itself. I am at some pains to keep my comments reasonably brief. Cohen's goal is to argue, and notwithstanding his commitment to reducing

social injustice, for "retaining what is of value, even in the face of replacing it by something of [seemingly] greater value."[*] Among the problems with the essay are: (a) it does not recognize how integral social injustice is to "what is"; and (b) the essay does not recognize at what level in its argument the idea of value is found. I nonetheless take Cohen to be both proposing and recognizing that the "is" and the "has long been" have long been extremely highly valued (and not least in the United Kingdom and at Oxford's All Souls College). We, or some of us, would like some or many things to stay the same because they are familiar to us, we feel comfortable with them; they are, as it were, the soil and landscape within which we have taken root and grown to who we are. Others might say, legitimately, that we are change adverse, and not least because we feel ourselves caught up in or on the verge of being caught up in the "creative destruction" of capitalism. (And it may be noted that, if you have ascended to a tenured professorship at Oxford, which includes ample rooms with early seventeenth-century paneling and a light teaching load, you might well be opposed to further change, and you might also like to talk about and write in opposition to social injustice, and this in part because such advocacy makes you feel yet more comfortable and may help in some small way to retard the action of the capitalist machine which will eventually do away with the Medieval tenure system and tutorials in favor of more exploitable adjunct teachers and more "cost-effective" MOOCs—massive open online courses.)

Cohen offers several illustrations of what he has in mind. The purest example is his eraser.

> I have a pencil eraser (or, in British English, a "rubber") that I have used ever since I became a lecturer forty-six years ago. When I got it, it was a cube, but now it is a sort of sphere, and although it is small, most of it is still there. It is not because I make very few mistakes that most of my eraser is still there, but because (a) I do not use pencils very much; (b) it takes only a little bit of rubbing to eliminate a mistake; and (c) I do not notice all my mistakes. I

[*] A tangential observation of Cohen's which I would not ignore:

> The combination of conservatism with wealth and inequality was relatively easy to sustain in a precapitalist society, but, when inequality became capitalist inequality, the combination of conservatism with wealth and inequality became untenable, among other reasons because capitalism so comprehensively transforms everything, including itself. . . . When the rich morphed, fully, into capitalists, the British Conservative Party because the anticonservative market party. . . . With fierce international competition , conserving old ways is too costly to the maintenance of wealth. And with historical working-class gains in place [e.g., the weekend!], small-c conservatism becomes a buffer against *in*equality. For the sake of protecting and extending the powers of wealth, big-C Conservatives regularly sacrifice the small c-conservatism that many of them genuinely cherish. [Italics in original.]

> would hate to lose this eraser. I would hate that even if I knew it could be readily replaced, not only, if I so wished, by a pristine cubical one, but even by one of precisely the same off-round shape and the same dingy color that my eraser has now acquired. There is no feature that stands apart from its history that makes me want to keep this eraser. I want *my* eraser, with *its* history. What could be more human than that?

From there he moves to urban renewal and urban and state planning, making arguments that will be familiar to fans of the old-neighborhood preserver Jane Jacobs. The old and particular is destroyed in favor of the new and purportedly better, but the betterness of anything new is reduced in many cases by its very newness and by the destruction involved in making room for it.[*]

Cohen is anything but absolutist. For example, he leaves room for people whose neighborhoods are "really lousy" to welcome the new. This opens a whole 'nother can of worms. Who makes this judgment of "really lousy-ness"? In New York and in London it has often been made by planners and their builder allies and has resulted in the destruction of the neighborhoods of other, poorer people (either for "their" benefit or to make more room for wealthier people, or in the name of "urban renewal" and "job creation"). Were I to say, for example, that it was really lousy all the McMansions that have been built in formerly lower-key and more egalitarian resort communities, or really lousy that public universities have had to keep raising tuitions while elite universities enjoy the luxuries and independence of large endowments, which have been accumulated as a result of favorable tax policies and lax treatment of the thievery of members of the most avaricious classes, . . . Well, one man's really lousy is another man's worth preserving in the name of this or that principle or value.

This brings us back to social justice, to attitudes toward change, and to the interrelation of the political, personal, and intellectual. Cohen himself did not value his old, working-class Montreal neighborhood so much that he was not willing to leave it behind to come to Oxford. And were, say, the many homeless of "my" New York City to be provided with homes in the name of social justice, these homes would need to be paid for—e.g., by aligning the minimum wage with the cost of housing in New York—and this would impinge on the old and particular of the status quo. It might impinge, for example, on the cost of the

[*] Cohen soon takes this to a next level of abstraction and writes that he is against "making errors that are in time self-legitimating and that thereby destroy old meanings." This might be characterized as an opposition to human history, which often seems to proceed along precisely these lines.

French toast and bottomless cup of coffee I enjoy in the neighborhood restaurant where I am doing this gentlemanly critiquing of Cohen's essays.

Conservative Marxism

What unsettled me most about Cohen's essay and this collection of his work was the specter that the resolution of such debates did not really matter, and that what mattered for Cohen and his colleagues was to engage in these debates and in ways that secured them good livings. An analogy came to my mind: actors in swashbuckling films engaging in sword fights. There is an illusion of great import—of the possibility, the inevitability of death—but the actors are paid to create this illusion for spectators who are interested in escape and catharsis. Cohen vs. Rawls, Cohen vs. Berlin, Cohen vs. French philosophy—perhaps professional wrestling would provide a yet better analogy.

In these battles, in these essays, Cohen exhibits impressive intelligence and dexterity, a rare mixture of aggressiveness and fellow feeling, and at times I was able to simply enjoy reading, watching him make use of his skills. At other times I felt duped. Supposing, for example, that capitalism is a sort of Frankenstein, or a train racing ever faster on rails of its own creation and carrying us to our, however creative, destruction. Could there possibly be an appropriate response to this historical moment? My gut instinct is no, no appropriate response possible; best options may include finding a warm fellow passenger with whom one might cuddle or a comedian with a large supply of jokes. But in this regard Cohen, I couldn't help feeling, was, and in an unfortunately limited sense, smarter and clear-seeing than me. He had glimpsed that—past the cuddlers and card players, the ticket collectors, sleepers and engine stokers—there was a debating car. A car with padded leather seats which might be had by people willing and able to talk, and talk well, and to prepare a next generation of philosophers, lawyers, political leaders, etc., to do yet more well-talking about the passing scenery and what we might do were there indeed some other, more appropriate response. And all this while ignoring that there is not. Destruction is inevitable, more cuddling and jokes sorely needed!

In a previous *Zeteo* review essay, **Adorno Was Right?**, I touched on the idea of conservative Marxism, which now seems a way of describing not only Adorno's position, or my own, but also G.A. Cohen's. Allow me to reprise a footnote from this earlier review:

> [Some] of us could have conservative habits precisely because we recognize that in a capitalist system "alles Ständische und Stehende verdampft" (all that is solid melts into air) and human needs are scorned amid the compulsion to increase productivity and return on capital. Precisely because we can see what Marx was calling attention to, we cling to bits of the past, to past ways that do not seem to have quite melted yet, that continue to speak to "human" needs. (That is, to non-economic needs: psychological, spiritual needs and physical needs.) I take Adorno to be an example of the breed.

In "Rescuing Conservatism," Cohen writes: "One thing Karl Marx said about the socialist revolution was that revolution was necessary to preserve the fruits of civilization against the ravages of capitalism." Cohen does not cite the text in which Marx made this observation. He does note, however, that he may have misappropriated Marx's remark, insofar as Marx was focused not, say, on preserving great works of art or venerable educational institutions, but on preserving the level of development of productive forces. I.e., Marx believed that capitalism needed to be preserved from destroying what was good about capitalism: its ability to liberate people from having to work long hours to produce the necessities of life. This danger can be seen quite clearly in the United States. As Thoreau argues in *Walden*, the money necessary for decent shelter, good food, and warm clothing might be earned in a few hours of work per day, and yet most Americans spend many, many more hours laboring, caught up in the machinery of the economic system and the values it inculcates.

My ideal conservative Marxist would not only explain this sad fact, but be ready and willing to speak of the sadness. He or she would allow personal, political, and intellectual perspectives to unabashedly play their roles in our attempts to understand our predicament and to converse with others about it. And as the train's ever-increasing speed makes a violent and awful derailment inevitable.

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