

Research Note

## G.A. COHEN'S INFLUENCE ON CHINESE ACADEMIA

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### Abstract

This research note surveys G.A. Cohen's influence on Chinese academia by looking at four of his contributions, namely: applying analytical methods in Marxist studies; providing a sober understanding of the relationship between markets and socialism; defending and upholding socialist egalitarianism; and summoning Marxists to engage in moral justification of socialism.

### Résumé

Cet note de recherche offre un aperçu de l'importance de G.A. Cohen dans le monde universitaire chinois en regardant quatre de ses contributions:

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Duan Zhongqiao est professeur en philosophie politique à Renmin University en Chine. Il a été chercheur invité à All Souls College, University d'Oxford pendant 1998-1999. Parmi ses livres sont *Marx's Theory of the Social Formation* (Avebury, 1995), *Rational Reflection and the Pursuit of Justice* (Harbin, 2007) et *Reinterpreting Historical Materialism* (Nanjing, 2009). Il a traduit deux des livres de G.A. Cohen en chinois: *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (Beijing, 2008) et *Why not Socialism?* (Beijing, 2011).

Li Yang est post-doctorante en philosophie politique à l'Université de Beijing. Sa thèse de doctorat était sur la philosophie politique des marxistes analytiques.

en utilisant des méthodes analytiques dans des études marxistes; en offrant un éclairage sobre des relations entre les marchés et le socialisme; en défendant et en soutenant l'égalitarisme socialiste; et en demandant aux marxistes de s'engager dans les justifications morales du socialisme.

**Key words**

analytical methods, market socialism, moral justification; socialist egalitarianism,

**Mots-clés**

méthodes analytiques; socialisme de marché; justification morale; égalitarisme socialiste

As the founder of analytical Marxism and a world-famous political philosopher, G.A. Cohen is not only influential in Western academia, but has also exerted an important influence on Chinese academia. With a great sense of honour, when he lectured at Renmin University of China in 1995, Cohen said to his Chinese audience, "I am informed that there used to be a very notable Canadian in China whose name is Norman Bethune. Actually he is a friend of my mother, who is also a member of the communist party of Canada."<sup>1</sup> If Bethune is considered to have made a significant contribution to China's anti-Japanese war through his spirit of internationalism, then Cohen should likewise be considered to have influenced Chinese academia through his analytical method and strong belief in socialism. So far, Chinese scholars have translated four of Cohen's works: *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense* (1989, 2008)<sup>2</sup>, *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* (2008), *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (2009) and *Why not Socialism?* (2011). Furthermore, a collection of his selected works, under the title *Between Marx and Nozick: Selected works of G.A. Cohen* (2007) was published in China in 2009, and more than sixty essays on his thought have appeared in leading Chinese academic journals. Moreover, so far about ten graduate students and PhD candidates have chosen Cohen as the topic, or part of the topic of their theses.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Cohen's contribution to Chinese academia may be appreciated by examining the following four aspects of his thought: applying analytical methods in Marxist studies; providing a sober understanding of the relationship between markets and socialism; defending and upholding socialist egalitarianism; and summoning Marxists to engage in moral justification of socialism.

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Bethune (1890-1939) served as a volunteer doctor during China's anti-Japanese war (1937-1945). Due to bad working conditions, he was infected while performing surgery and died from a blood disease. The Chinese people are grateful to this Canadian hero, and have built several memorials for him.

<sup>2</sup> There are two Chinese editions of this book. One is translated from the 1979 original edition, and the other is from the 2000 edition.

<sup>3</sup> This statistical data is from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (www.CNKI.net).

## Applying Analytical Methods in Marxist Studies

Cohen's earliest influence on Chinese academia was his application of analytical methods in the interpretation of Marxian theory. The Chinese edition of Cohen's first book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*, was made available to Chinese Marxist scholars in the late 1980s. By then these scholars had been influenced for a long time by the Soviet Union's orthodox textbook philosophy, and later by European continental Marxists such as Lukacs and Althusser. Chinese scholars found the methods of Anglo-American analytical philosophy used in Cohen's book novel and inspiring, making Marx's theory very clear and consistent, and soon began to adopt these methods in Chinese Marxist studies. This represented an important development in studies of Marxism in China, since as the well-known Chinese Marxist scholar Yu Wujin once said:

Contemporary Chinese scholars, especially Marxist scholars, have inherited the obscure style of Chinese traditional culture and hardly get any serious training in analytical philosophy and logic. That's why they have been indifferent to Anglo-American analytical philosophy, yet attracted to the ambiguous style of European continental philosophers. They are often obsessed with unimportant details and hardly make any groundbreaking achievements in fundamental theories (Yu Wujin and Chen Xueming 2002, 506).

Yu pointed out that the greatest defect of contemporary Chinese Marxist studies lies in the lack of clear definition of concepts and analysis, and hence he argued that the explicit and rigorous style emphasized by Cohen is worth learning. He suggested that Chinese Marxist scholars employ analytical methods into their research. (see Yu Wujin and Jin Yaomei 2009, 7)

As the influence of Cohen's book prevailed, many Chinese textbooks on foreign Marxism started to adopt Cohen's use of analytical methods; for example, drawing upon the way Cohen reinterprets such classic concepts in historical materialism as productive forces and relations, and economic base and superstructure through logical and linguistic analysis, and building upon Cohen's reconstruction of the relations among those concepts through functionalist explanations (see Zeng Zhisheng 1998; Wangwei and Pang Junjing 1999; Duan Zhongqiao 2001; Yu Wujin and Chen Xueming 2002; Zhang Yibing and Hu Daping 2003; Yan Hongyuan and Song Huifang 2004; He Ping 2009). Some Chinese Marxist scholars adopted Cohen's analytical method but provided a different interpretation of historical materialism from Cohen (see Duan Zhongqiao 2009, 376).

However, it should be noted that even though Chinese scholars highly praised Cohen's methods of analytical philosophy in reconstructing Marxism, most don't agree

with all of his opinions and arguments. For instance, many Chinese Marxists disagree with Cohen's rejection of dialectics. They don't think that the dialectic way of thinking reduces the lucidity of theory; on the contrary, they believe it can make the theory more explicit and concrete. A good example of this is Marx's use of dialectic logic in *Das Capital* (see Duan Zhongqiao 2001, 171; Cao Yutao 2009; Meng Qinglong 2011). Some other scholars disagree with Cohen's claim that functional explanation is intrinsic to historical materialism. They argue that the functional explanation is forced upon Marx by Cohen, although it does help to combat false interpretations of historical materialism, including simplistic readings of Marx that depend upon concepts like "overdetermination" and "structural causality". Marx already very clearly stated the relation between productive forces and productive relations as well as the relation between base and superstructure, and Cohen's application of functional explanation only makes those relations more complicated, and harder to understand. (see Yu Wujin 2008; Yue Changling 1989; Duan Zhongqiao 2001, 2005; Zhang Yibing and Hu Daping, 2003)

### **Providing a Sober Understanding of the Relation between Market and Socialism**

Another influence of Cohen on Chinese academia is his understanding of the relation between the market and socialism. After "building a socialist market economy" was officially set as the goal of Chinese economic reform in 1992, Chinese scholars started to seek an ideal way of combining socialism and the market; thus various currents of market socialism prevailing in the West were imported into China. Cohen presented several speeches on market socialism in 1995 when he was invited to China as a guest speaker. He said in his speech:

I believe that it is good for the political prospects of socialism that market socialism is being brought to the fore as an object of advocacy and policy: these socialist intellectuals, even some of the fashion-driven ones, are performing a useful political service. But I also think that market socialism is at best second best, even if it is the best (or more than the best) at which it is now reasonable to aim, and that many socialist intellectuals who think otherwise are indulging in wishful thinking.<sup>1</sup>

He criticized the market for two reasons. First, the market is unjust in its distribution. Although the market bases its distribution on contribution to production, its distribution principle still bears a defect. Marx pointed out in his *Critique of the Gotha*

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<sup>1</sup> The main content of Cohen's speech was later translated into Chinese, and published in the *Journal of Renmin University* (no.3, 1996), with the title "Comments on Market Socialism".

*Programme* that “to each according to his contribution” is a right of inequality, just like all other bourgeois rights, because “it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowments and thus productive capacity as natural privileges” (Karl Marx and Frederick Engels 1968, 324). While market socialism may remove the income injustice caused by differential ownership of capital, it preserves the income injustice caused by differential ownership of endowments. Second, the market is mean in its motivational presuppositions. In a market society, the immediate motive to productive activity is some mixture of greed and fear. Such motivation is against the socialist values of reciprocity and community. The market only has instrumental value and it is “intrinsically repugnant”, but many people are blinded by its extrinsic value. According to Cohen, as far as a middle-range political program is concerned, market socialism is probably a good idea, but it is at most second best compared with genuine socialism. Moreover, most market socialists’ claims for it are overly grand and, thus, should not be accepted.

Although it was Western theories of market socialism on which Cohen commented, his comments still helped Chinese scholars gain a comprehensive understanding of the market. After China began to aim at a socialist market economy, just as Cohen observed about some Western market socialists, many Chinese scholars were blinded by the instrumental value of the market and took the market to be a solution to all social problems in China. As a socialist from a developed capitalist country with a mature market system, Cohen uncovered the defects of the market, which provides a warning to those Chinese scholars who blindly worship the market economy. Some Chinese scholars point out that Cohen made them realize market socialism is still a considerable distance from genuine socialism. Hence, “China should gradually change the market distribution principle into a socialist egalitarian principle. The result of market distribution should be adjusted, in order to narrow the income gap and achieve a more equal and, thus, a more just socialist distribution” (Liu Minghe 2002, 37). Some other scholars point out that Cohen raised a question for them, namely, how does China manage to keep the advantages of the market in information organizing while eliminating its shabby motivation and unjust result? They put forward that in constructing a socialist economy, China should try its best to reduce the unwanted side-effects of the market. Measures that can be taken include breeding the proper social ethos to encourage people to help each other and leveling national income by taxation (see Ding Wenxiang and Zhang Jinjian 1995). All in all, Cohen’s sober understanding of market socialism has broken the wishful thinking of some Chinese scholars about the market, and, thus, has become an important reference of the Chinese theory of the socialist market economy.

### **Defending and Upholding Socialist Egalitarianism**

Cohen’s third influence on Chinese academia concerns his thought on socialist

egalitarianism. Since the 1990s, due to the implementation of social and economic reform, China has made significant achievements in the economy, while at the same time some social injustices also emerged, such as an income gap and unequal opportunities. So many Chinese scholars began to do research on theories of social justice. With a lack of tradition of political philosophy, they took Western political philosophers as their models and made modifications of their theories. As seen from a survey of publications on this topic, for almost ten years Chinese scholars have focused on liberal philosophers such as John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin and Robert Nozick,<sup>1</sup> trying to find some implications for Chinese society in their theories. For example, they try to use Rawls' difference principle to tackle the problem of income gaps and socially disadvantaged groups. In short, liberal political philosophy has been the dominant subject studied by Chinese academia for at least the past two decades.

In the beginning of the 21st century, some Chinese scholars became familiar with Cohen's political philosophy, and realized that "G.A. Cohen's value and importance goes beyond the Marxist circle, and that he is also a recognized theoretician in Western political philosophical circles, an active and radical figure in the academic community of social justice and equality" (Xu Youyu 2011, 70). They discovered that Cohen strongly attacked liberal political philosophy, including Nozick's libertarianism and Rawls' liberal egalitarianism, and argued for an alternative, socialist egalitarianism, which is the exact theory China ought to borrow. Hence, Cohen's thoughts on political philosophy have received more and more attention, especially his books *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* (2008), *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (2009) and *Why not Socialism?* (2011), which have been translated into Chinese. And recently more and more essays have emerged by Chinese scholars on his political thought. For Chinese scholars, Cohen has demonstrated that Nozick's attack on socialism based on the principle of self-ownership is untenable, that the inequality tolerated by Rawls's difference principle is unjust, and that socialist egalitarianism aims at eliminating inequalities caused both by social differences and by natural differences. One Chinese scholar comments that Cohen helps Chinese academia see "the inequality and injustice covered by the equal and just slogans of contemporary liberals" and "the possibility of a more just future society" (Zhu Jusheng 2010, 88). Another scholar holds that although Cohen's socialist egalitarianism and his criticism of Nozick and Rawls are based on realities and problems peculiar to Western society, they still deepen our understanding of fundamental concepts of political philosophy such as freedom, equality and justice. And this has had positive effects on the theory of a harmonious socialist society with Chinese characteristics<sup>2</sup> (see Liu Jingzhao

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<sup>1</sup> Some communitarian figures such as Alasdair MacIntyre also attracted much attention.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of "socialist harmonious society" which incorporates concepts of social justice and equality was brought up by Hu Jintao, the General Secretary of the Party and President of China in 1994. For a discussion of this idea, see Baogang Guo and Sujian Guo, eds., *China in Search of a Harmonious Society*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2008.

2009). It must be recognized that not all Chinese scholars accept Cohen's view. A scholar, also a proponent of liberalism, argues that Cohen's socialist egalitarianism is too radical to be compatible with human nature and social reality, and that Cohen fails to take into account the incentive mechanism after the realization of radical equality. He also argues that Cohen has not adequately addressed the alienation of power that may be caused by giving absolute power to administrative groups in order to realize his egalitarian standard. And he thinks this is an important point because this proved to be serious problems in China's earlier practice of socialism<sup>1</sup> (See Xu Youyu 2011).

### Summoning Marxists to Engage in Moral Justification of Socialism

Cohen's last -- but not least-- influence on Chinese academia is his emphasis on the necessity of morally justifying socialism. As is known to many, shortly after his second book, Cohen turned from historical materialism to political philosophy. This phenomenon has had a strong effect on Chinese Marxists. Influenced by Soviet textbook Marxism, the Chinese Marxist academic circle has long been dominated by a rigid interpretation of historical determinism. Chinese Marxists, just like those classical Marxists described by Cohen in his *Self-ownership, Freedom and Equality*, are preoccupied with historical and economic analyses of socialism. They never dabbled in normative concepts, such as justice, freedom and equality, but devoted their intellectual energy to "the hard factual carapace" surrounding these values. (Cohen 1995, 5) They believed that there is a factual foundation for the historically inevitability of socialism and economic equality; thus, they don't bother to think about why socialism and equality is morally right or more desirable than capitalism. However, their ignorance of normative thinking is questioned by Cohen in his explanation of why he turned to research in political philosophy. He argues that those historical facts emphasized by classical Marxists, such as the rise of an organized working class and the greater material abundance brought by continual development of productive forces which classical Marxists believed would guarantee ultimate equality are no longer self-evidently inevitable. So if we still wish to sustain a socialist commitment, we can no longer rely on historical inevitability; rather, we should convince people that socialism is morally right and desirable, which brings an intellectual need to philosophize about values and principles. A Chinese Marxist scholar comments that Cohen's view has given some enlightenment to Chinese Marxists. He said, "new facts and changes in the contemporary world have transformed values and normative concepts such as equality and justice, which used to be ignored in classical Marxism, into vital subjects for today's Marxists. It is an important and

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<sup>1</sup> This scholar points out that in Mao's later years when Chinese society tried to implement radical egalitarianism, the people's commune movement resulted in authoritarian politics and a backward economy. Chinese people went through unimaginable sufferings during that time.

challenging task facing us.” (Duan Zhongqiao 2006, 34)

The main reason that traditional Marxists pay little attention to moral principles is because according to historical materialism, values and norms are subordinate to — and change with— economic factors, and given this law, it is thus impossible to talk about trans-historical normative truth. But Cohen reminds us that the view that ultimate normative truth is historically invariant can be in line with the law that historical circumstances or economic factors affect what norms and principles (of justice, for example) demand, because timelessly valid principles have different implications at different times. (see Cohen 1995, 2) This view undoubtedly provides Marxism a justification for engaging in normative theory. A Chinese Marxist scholar has commented,

Today, we have realized that the historical inevitability of socialism and the moral justification of socialism are two totally different issues. For a long time, we haven't been able to distinguish them, and even replaced the latter with the former. That is why normative problems such as justice, equality and right have long been omitted in the Marxist tradition. (Wang Xingfu 2011, 57).

Now, an increasing number of Chinese Marxists agree with Cohen on the point that the realization of socialism cannot rely solely on the development of productive forces, but has also to rely on the guidance provided by the correct values, norms and principles (see Zhu Jusheng 2010; Duan Zhongqiao 2006; Yuan Jiuhong and Zhu Jusheng 2010; Wang Xingfu 2011; Li Yang 2011; Wang Zengshou 2010; Li Huarong and Qiao Ruijin 2008). They agree that it is now necessary for contemporary Marxists to know about all of today's competing theories of justice and equality, and state clearly their own egalitarian view. As a result, more and more publications on justice from a Marxist perspective are emerging in Chinese academia.

It should be noted that although Chinese Marxists agree with the necessity of a moral justification for socialism expounded by Cohen, they don't agree with his doubts on the theory of historical inevitability. According to them, the realization of the ultimate goal of equality relies fundamentally on material bases such as the productive forces, and it cannot be attained solely by moral argument and/or advocating social justice, even if moral justification of socialism is now necessary. They criticize Cohen insofar as he argued that the possibility of realizing socialism depends solely on people's political beliefs and values, and so gave up seeking a material basis for socialism, a return to the Utopian socialism and moral idealism criticized by Marx. They hold that equality, according to Marx, presupposes certain historical conditions, and if equality is enforced without regard for the material basis of it, the inevitable result is political dictatorship or an authoritarian regime, fake formal equality, a decline in production resulting from

repressed incentives and the denial of people's creativity, and universal poverty (See Ge Siyou 2008; Yao Guohong 2008; Li Huarong and Qiao Ruijin 2008; Zhu Jusheng 2010; Li Yang 2011).

## Conclusion

Above we outlined four dimensions of Cohen's influence on China's academia. Although his specific arguments and opinions are not all accepted by Chinese scholars, the clarity and enlightenment he provided are widely acknowledged. Chinese Marxists especially admire his non-dogmatic attitude toward tradition, his honesty about science and truth as a Marxist, his strong commitment and unceasing efforts as a socialist, and his spirit of facing realistic problems and updating theories accordingly as a general theoretician. We believe that as China's opening-up and reform deepens, the significance of Cohen's influence on Chinese academia will be increasingly recognized by more and more Chinese scholars.

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