



## Reading Political Philosophy: From Machiavelli to Mill

*Derek McTravers and Gerry Cohen on The German Ideology*

### Derek McTravers

Hello, I'm Derek McTravers and I'm here with Gerry Cohen, Tutorial Professor of Social and Political Theory, and Fellow of All Souls, Oxford. Gerry, what advice would you give to read Part 1 of *The German Ideology*?

### Gerry Cohen

A large part of Part 1 of *The German Ideology* is the theory of history that Marx was in course of developing at the time when he wrote the work because he, rather than Engels, wrote the bulk of Part 1 of the book. And because he was in course of developing that theory at the time when he was writing, it presents itself in a rather unruly form, and so it's very, very difficult to read Part 1 of *The German Ideology* and distil just from that text what the theory of history is that he's developing. Another point is that if *The German Ideology* was never published, and consequently there was never imposed on Marx the discipline of having to give a structured discourse, which he showed himself amply capable of in later works that were published. I would say by the way that it's often said that Marx writes in a barbarous style, disorderly, moving all over the place in his exposition, this is entirely true of every one of his unpublished works, and utterly false of anything that he ever published, there's not single work of Marx that he published which isn't elegant from a literary point of view. It's a great calumny which depends on the stupidity of judging a person according to what are semi-notes.

### Derek McTravers

Apart from the theory of history, do any other themes spring to mind as being important in *The German Ideology*, Part 1?

### Gerry Cohen

Yes, there are two themes, human beings in capitalist society being faced by alienated products of their own activity which oppressed them, and I'll come back to what that means in a moment, and the other theme is the theme of ideology itself, what it is and what role it plays in history.

### Derek McTravers

Okay, could we start by talking about alienation?

### Gerry Cohen

Well the term alienation is our translation into English of the German word 'enfremdo' which is a word built around the word friend, which means strange, and enfremdo is a process of estrangement or something which wasn't strange becomes estranged. What becomes estranged from people is innocence, their own activity, their own nature, their very selves, so that they become split beings, and this split is matched by an institutional split, or a split rather between the institutional life of people from which they're estranged, and their immediate real, practical, striving, feeling, thinking, interacting.

### Derek McTravers

How does the split actually show up in people's lives?

### Gerry Cohen

Let me give an example. If any human beings are going to live together, they're going to live together by certain rules which govern their interaction, and in certain circumstances, happy ones, they all live by those rules because they all accept them, and believe in them, and co-

operate happily, therefore, within the framework of those rules. But if there are substantial divisions of interest between them, if some of them are exploiting others, then it's very unlikely that they're all going to converge on a set of rules and peacefully co-operate around them. It's far more likely that those rules will need to be enforced by coercion. It's far more likely, therefore, that there is going to have to be a state which enforces the rules under which these people live. Now in such a condition, where the rules aren't developed inside the community itself, they are proclaimed and enforced from outside the community so that this very human thing of co-operating with others, instead of being immediate in people's lives, gets projected onto an alien institution, and then that institution oppresses those people. Whenever Marx talks about alienation there was always two movements to it. There's one that's built into the word estrangement where something with which you should be in unity gets project out, estranged, and the second element additionally that estranged thing, oppresses you. So, for example, in an earlier use of alienation by Marx's important predecessor, Ludwig Feuerbach, Feuerbach was a critic of the Christian religion, understood as a doctrine which says that there is a superhuman entity called god who is completely good, completely powerful, and completely knowledgeable and so forth. Feuerbach thought that in worshipping such a being there was alienation. First, all the features of this deity, he thought, are really features of human beings, which people are not at home with so they project them somewhere else onto a god, and in worshipping that god they're denying their own humanity because they're saying that everything good about their humanity belongs to the god, and not to them, and they're sinful. What they should do is just worship and subordinate themselves to that god and represses their existence according to what they take to be the gods' fearsome dictates. So *The German Ideology* talks about the state as an alienated product of human activity and Marx was always looking around at various social institutions, finding a division in them where there should be unity, which leads to the need to project outside, a principle that will unite them, and then whenever institution is the bearer of that principle, oppresses those people.

### **Derek McTravers**

So alienation is one important theme of *The German Ideology*, Part 1, but what about the other theme you mentioned, ideology?

### **Gerry Cohen**

An ideology from Marx and Engels is certainly a false doctrine, but not just any false doctrine. It's also a false doctrine that serves the interest of a ruling class, and if people who develop the ideology mustn't be aware that they are developing it on behalf of a class. They have to think that these ideas are ones they believe because of their own intellectual merits, and they have to think that the rule of the class that these ideas legitimate essentially is there because wise people notice that these ideas and legitimate and therefore institute or preserve that rule, so they have to have what Marx and Engels called the ideological illusion, that ideas rule the world, and that they hold these ideas because of their merits, rather than for the real reason why they hold them – because they are serving the interests of a ruling class. So they've got to have a real conviction and that means they have to believe that they're prescribing to society and history, whereas actually they are serving historical purposes and that's why they're there. Now I believe profoundly that this theory of ideology has an enormous amount of truth in it, that is that, for example in our society, there is a widespread passionate belief in capitalism which is justified in many different ways, and which you can read in sincerely written articles in all our newspapers by people who truly believe that but, of course, the question of what gets published and promoted is quite a different matter. What gets published and promoted is what's safe and what serves the existing order, so that you get this wonderful appearance that completely fair-minded, dispassionate, neutral people all would agree that capitalism is the right sort of system whereas, in fact, the reason why there's such a strong intellectual constituency is because they oppositional view isn't nourished because the people who have the means of nourishing, and the means of communication, are the people who are at the top of the existing order. So I think the theory of ideology is actually a part of Marxism which, like virtually all parts of Marxism many people say are superseded or outmoded, but I actually think that it's a lot more truth than the average sophisticated, educated person now thinks.

**Derek McTravers**

One of the benefits Marx seems to have thought would come along with communism would be the abolition of alienation, but is this really a benefit, I mean why couldn't people choose to have a bit of alienation if in compensation they could have a lot of some other good they wanted?

**Gerry Cohen**

And I think I would respond to that criticism as follows. The criticism shows their conception of politics, which Marx certainly didn't have, and which seems to me also to be a false one, though it's not as false as Marx would have thought it is. The conception is okay, politics is about bringing about states of affairs for human beings or sustaining the states of affairs that exist, so let's consider what values we believe in and then we'll bring about whatever state of affairs we can. Now obviously there are things to care about other than an unalienated existence, yet that seems to be all that Marx cared about, so Marx was wrong in his politics. But that supposes that we're starting from a clean slate and that we can do what we like by way of implementing values. Life often isn't like that because the set of possibilities that are open to you are highly constrained by history and circumstance. Just think of a family, I mean it would just be crazy if the father or mother sat down while the family was having dinner and said, well, how shall we run this family? You'd have to be mega-American to go on in that kind of way which is a relevant joke because the point is, is a total lack of tradition which forces Americans to look at things in this 'how are we going to plan it?' that way.

**Derek McTravers**

So then it's not a matter of people standing outside their historical circumstances, and then being able to choose from a range of options they decide for themselves?

**Gerry Cohen**

Well the point is that history is moving in a certain direction. There are inevitabilities in history. Not everything is inevitable but there are certain absolute inevitabilities. It's not that human beings aren't free, of course they are. The inevitabilities are the result of the free choices by people in context where it would be stupid for them to choose any other way. I mean if 95% of the people have mobile 'phones and, you know, then the rest have to choose them, not because they don't have free will, but because that's the most intelligent use of their free will, if they have it, in that context. So historical inevitability happens without prejudice to the freedom of human beings when Marx thought that the Proletarian Revolution was historically inevitable, what would make it inevitable, except a view on his part about whether it would be sensible for working people to do in certain circumstances?

**Derek McTravers**

Right, but what does this all have to do with Kymlicka's attack on Marx's attack on alienation?

**Gerry Cohen**

There's an enormous amount of what actually happens that's due inevitably to technological developments, and Marx thought that a happy future would ensue in which there would be no need for the kind of labour under which human activity is alienated. There would be so much abundance that nobody would have to do a really lousy job and therefore you could say Kymlicka's question wouldn't arise. Marx didn't say let's forget about other values and go for an unalienated existence, he said isn't it great that whatever else is going to happen, we're going to get an unalienated existence? Now Kymlicka might come back and ask a typical philosopher's question, I mean it should really be done in a very pedantic Oxford accent, and the philosopher would ask at this point, 'But nevertheless have a great abundance, what if you could just get a little extra by some alienated labour, just, just perhaps an hour a day', right, and the answer is, okay, big deal. The answer is not Karl Marx like some Old Testament prophet come fulminating down and say no, you must never do something which uses your powers in a way that you don't want to use them for the mere sake of being able to buy sirloin steak instead of rump steak. It's just a crazy framing of the issue and how Marx faced it to criticise him in the way Kymlicka does. It doesn't relate to the reality of what was preoccupying him.

**Derek McTravers**

A couple of aspects of Marx has thought to you touched on there do seem implausible, at least when you first come across them, that communism will be a period of great abundance, there won't be any scarcity, and secondly that people's characters will be such that they will work for the common good and interact in some kind of true community – do you think there's anything that can be said to make those two presuppositions of communism seem more plausible, or do you think they're just hopeless?

**Gerry Cohen**

Well I don't think they're as independent as you might think when you say there are these two presuppositions, because if you really think through what I think he intended by abundance, which was something enormous and absolutely amazing where you could just take anything you want from the common store, then the human nature premise is very weak. It just says people aren't going to be ordinary and needlessly destructive, it doesn't ask them to sacrifice anything. I mean I'm saying the abundance premise is so extravagant that the second premise can be taken on board because the extent to which people need to work for the common good in circumstances like that is very modest. But the abundance premise is ecologically puerile, I mean it's clear that unless somebody invents something we don't know about yet, like a so-called fusion gun that operates directly to change the sub-molecular structure of matter so that you could turn, you know, camel dung into tiramisu. Failing a technological breakthrough that might come, the premise of abundance is just absurd, I mean we, it contradicts everything we know about the limits there are on the planet Earth, and therefore Marxists can't rely on it the way they did through the tradition, so I'm saying it's not that we're saddled with two difficult premises, we're saddled with choice with respect to what would make communism possible, and much more than before we have to go for the human nature facilitation rather than the abundance facilitation. Now you ask me do I know whether communism is possible, whether the degree of co-operation that Marx and Engels hope to see is possible in the absence of this tremendous technological abundance that makes it cheap to do it, and my answer is I don't know. I mean I think that it's unquestionably a more attractive vision of a society than one where people essentially interact with each other on a basis of greed and fear, which is what the market is, and I would like to make things as much like that as possible, and I don't have to know how far along that road it's possible to go to know that it's worth travelling. So from a practical, even revolutionary point of view, it's not necessary to know that that hope toward consummation is possible.

**Derek McTravers**

We also standardly believe that certain of what we can broadly call liberal rights apply to us so, for example, that we have the right to dispose of our property, the right to develop our talents in the way we want, and so on and so forth – what is the status of those claims?

**Gerry Cohen**

Well I think they're moral truths and I actually don't think there's anything in Marx that suggests that he thought otherwise, though he might have thought that he thought otherwise. I think that he was confused about moral values and although he held many passionately and believed in them, that they were eternal truths, he felt that they couldn't be, so he didn't believe that he believed that. And when he criticised, as he did in the Jewish Question liberal rights I don't think that there's anything in the Jewish Question which suggests that he wanted those rights in resident at all. The critique is anybody who thinks that declaring and enforcing these rights is necessary and sufficient for a good society is doubly wrong. It's not necessary for a good society to declare and enforce them because they will be respected without special declaration by a state body, and it's not sufficient to declare and enforce them because look, they are declared and enforced, but this society isn't very good. So I think that's the critique of liberal rights in the Jewish Question which suggests that there shouldn't be those liberal rights.

**Derek McTravers**

Although there's certainly one right which Marx would want rescinded which is the right to private property.

**Gerry Cohen**

Well, as he says in the Communist Manifesto, the private property that we want to abolish is not personal property. It's a use of private property that he wants to abolish, namely its use as capital, its use to hire other people and make money out of it. I mean you would have your own toothbrush under communism. The only kind of property that he wants to abolish is property which enables some people to exercise power over others. I believe that Marx's picture of communism is wildly, insanely optimistic. I believe that's the right criticism that this degree of liberation from material constraint isn't going to happen. But I don't think that his vision of communism is sort of some kind of schmaltzy togetherness at all. When he says such things as the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all its very individualistic, he's saying we can all verge together and benefit from one another, and it's not all pulling together in the same direction, but all complementing one another in a marvellous harmony of difference, so to speak.

**Derek McTravers**

Okay thanks. Could I now ask you about Marx's functional explanations? I'd like to ask first how's this situated in Marx's works – what is Marx's thesis for historical development?

**Gerry Cohen**

Well Marx believes that there is a near irrepressible tendency for human productive power to grow across the course of history. Some people think it's not true of history as a whole, but obviously technological development across the course of the 20th Century is irrepressible, it feeds on itself the more you make discoveries of a kind that are applicable to production, the more discoveries you're going to make, and that process can't be stopped, but even though it's irrepressible it won't happen unless certain other things are true. Social structures have to be favourable to that process in order for that process to occur. I mean if you have a religion which forbids changing the way that you produce things you won't get that process, but he thinks that that process is in the end so irrepressible that such a religion will be smashed, and will be destroyed. So we have two things here. We have a fundamental trend of history as development of productive power, but on the other hand we see productive power won't develop unless social and political structures are congenial to it, but this isn't a contradiction if we can say that the reason why those structures are in place are because they are congenial to it. If we can say the reason why this society is now secular, and doesn't have a fundamentalist religion like it used to, is because a fundamentalist religion would have inhibited it, and a secular consciousness promotes this process. Now there you're explaining the secularisation by reference to its effects, you're saying secularisation occurs because it promotes the development of technology and productive power, and of course you can't literally say that something happens because of its effect, you can't have something explained by something that happens later, and because people have tended to think that functional explanations operate that way they have rejected them, but I think the way they operate is that you explain the functional thing - in our case the development of productive power – by the fact that such a thing in that place, in that time would develop productive power, and that happens before the thing is actually there, so I've tried to explain why the explanations have to be functional explanations, and why functional explanations are basically okay.

**Derek McTravers**

Right, can I just see if I've got this right? To take your example – there's a propensity for secularisation to increase productive power and that propensity is a fact, and it's that fact which explains the secularisation?

**Gerry Cohen**

Absolutely.

**Derek McTravers**

But isn't there still a problem because how does the fact that there is that propensity explain how that propensity actually gives rise to the secularisation?

**Gerry Cohen**

You know that's a completely correct question, and sometimes we can know that the functional thing is explained by its function without knowing how it's explained by its function, so to take a leading example, it would be crazy to think that before Darwin discovered the mechanism of Tran variation and natural selection, people didn't realise that the function of the eye was to see. The reason why matter in the human or animal eye is distributed the way that it is, is because that distribution has the effect of sight. Everybody knew that already and they might have had certain views about how to ask your question in the biological context, how the fact that that structure promotes sight explains the fact that it does have that structure, and Darwin said the essence is that there's a variation in the case of the eye, you get a creature with a very primitive sensitivity to light which gives an advantage over other creatures that don't have any sensitivity to light because it can make distinctions about what's in the environment more than those other creatures can, and so by the law of averages sometimes it's going to prevail when they would go down, so those creatures with more sensitivity to light have offspring, some of which have even greater sensitivity, and those are the ones that tend to be selected so that eventually you get this thing being there, explained by its facility for responding to light and giving visual information, and that's the story that underlies the functional explanation. With respect to ideology I gave you why it would be that those, the functional explanation of the ideology, why it would be that the ideas that prevail are those that function to protect the rule of the ruling class where the ideas didn't have to be devised for that purpose. And actually the selectors, the people with the money and the power, don't have to be themselves deliberately trying to support the system either, they simply have to be sensitised, they know not why, against competing ideas, you know which disturbed them more, made them feel uncomfortable, so there are complex stories, I think, whereby in individual cases you can make out the plausibility of a functional explanation, and maybe in other cases you can't.

**Derek McTravers**

Marx and Engels seemed to think that the communist revolution had been completely different in kind from previous revolutions and this was largely to do with the nature of the people who conduct this revolution in the proletariat – could you just say why they thought that and how that goes?

**Gerry Cohen**

Well they thought all earlier revolutions were made by a minority in society as a kind of replacement of one elite by a wider elite, as with the French revolution, and that in order to achieve that revolution the insurgent challenging elite would have to recruit a larger proportion of society to its side than itself represented, and the only way they could do that is by pretending that their interests were identical with those of the vast majority of people in society. The only way they could do that is by actually believe it for reasons I gave earlier, it's too difficult to con people if you don't believe it yourself, and so all previous revolutions were ones in which the revolutionaries were confused about what they were doing and didn't realise the historical significance of their own action. French revolutionaries thought they were bringing into being a society of liberty, equality and fraternity, and in fact they brought into being a capitalist society of exploitation and inequality and people being treated as means to other people's ends. But the proletariat represents the vast majority by the time capitalist society is ripe for revolution, and therefore there is absolutely no need for the proletariat to court anybody else, and there's therefore no need for it to make up some pretence about its identity of interests with others, and there is therefore no need then for this revolution to be characterised by illusion on the part of the revolutionary agents.

**Derek McTravers**

Gerry Cohen, thank you very much.