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The Proletariat and Historical Progress

From his earliest work on Hegel, when Marx first puzzled over the working class, the proletariat's role in historical change guided his deliberations. Initially he characterized the proletariat in Aristotelian terms, saying that the propertyless laboring class does "not so much constitute a class of civil society as provide the ground on which the circles of civil society move and have their being."¹ However, slightly later, in the "Introduction" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx had already assigned the proletariat a central role in history. The proletariat is a class with "radical chains" whose very existence proclaims the "dissolution of the existing world order."²

This famous characterization succinctly expresses the enormous importance of the proletariat in Marx's theory of history. The proletariat is both the living expression of the end of the old order and the indispensable agent of the new. The proletariat reveals the exhaustion of capitalism; its conditions of existence demonstrate the structural inability of capitalism to control and rationally employ the forces it has conjured. The proletariat is therefore both created by and consummates world-historical change, the "gravedigger" of capitalism.

Unlike Max Weber's discussion of social class, which is more taxonomy than theory, Marx's concept of "class" is firmly embedded in his theory of history. In Marxian theory class is the key social relation in society (ownership of productive forces) in that it identifies the conflict potentials of a particular society, predicts the major collective actors who will emerge to struggle over the existing forms and distribution of productive forces, and indicates the new social relations that will free the productive forces for further development. It is not surprising that many have complained of the over-burdening of the concept class in Marxian theory.³

In Marx's theory of history the proletariat's struggles are necessary for the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of a society in which pro-

duction is directly geared to the satisfaction of needs, i.e., communism. However, Marx was no voluntarist. In his justly famous phrase, "Men make their own history but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past."⁴ The relative weights of the historical situation (objective conditions) and revolutionary organization (agency) and the interaction between conditions and agency have always been obscure in Marx's theory. Consequently the precise role of the proletariat in historical change is equally unclear.

A recent debate, primarily concerned with examining the logical foundations of Marx's "materialist theory of history," has helped to elucidate the role theoretically assigned to the proletariat in furthering historical progress. This continuing debate was originally sparked by G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defense*.⁵ It is useful at the outset to explore this discussion in order to clarify the importance of the proletariat in Marx's historical theory and to fully appreciate what is lost if the proletariat is judged to be incapable of its revolutionary vocation.

CLASS STRUGGLE AND THE DEVELOPMENT THESIS

Marx's theory of history rests on the distinction and relationship between the "forces of production" and the "relations of production" in an historically specific "mode of production," e.g., capitalism. These are the circumstances over which any generation has no choice, those "directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." Following Cohen's account, the phrase forces of production refers to instruments of production, raw materials, and the productive capacities of labor-power ("strength, skill, knowledge, inventiveness, etc."). Especially important is labor-power reinforced by "productively useful science." In contrast, the phrase relations of production means the pattern of ownership of the forces of production: "either relations of ownership by persons of productive forces or persons *or* relations presupposing such ownership."⁶ The pattern of ownership establishes a specific class structure in each historical mode of production.

In his logical reconstruction of historical materialism Cohen emphasizes the objective conditions necessary for revolutionary change. Elaborating Marx's "1859 Preface," Cohen argues that there are two principal theses of Marx's theory of history: the "Primacy Thesis" and the "Development Thesis." The Primacy Thesis states that specific productive relations exist in a certain society because they are "propitious" for the

development of the productive forces. As the forces increase they reach a point where they can no longer develop within these relations of production. That is, the existing relations of production (ownership) become “fetters” on the further development of the forces and are replaced by new relations.⁷ Therefore in the dynamic of history the forces of production have “primacy” over the relations of production.

This presents an immediate and oft-mentioned problem: how can it be said that the forces have primacy when their development only occurs through the relations of production? Critics of the materialist theory of history argue that since the forces of production only develop within specific relations of production, the latter actually appear to have primacy over the former. At the least, the necessary interaction between the forces of production and relations of production should deny the primacy of the forces of production.

Cohen defends the logical argument of historical materialism by carefully articulating the Development Thesis: there is an autonomous tendency in history for the forces of production to develop, although this development is only realized through specific relations of production. The qualifying phrase distinguishes Marx’s position from a claim that the forces of production tend to develop autonomously. The historical *tendency* of development of productive forces is autonomous. This does not imply that the productive forces will develop regardless of the existing relations of production. The forces of production manifest their primacy precisely by selecting the relations of production which are most propitious for their development. Cohen argues in this way that, contrary to the critics, it is not only consistent to argue that forces develop through relations of production but necessary because otherwise the forces of production would not have the effect of selecting optimal relations of production.⁸

According to Cohen, Marx believed that it is this autonomous tendency of the forces of production to develop that makes history “a coherent story.”⁹ Cohen states that the forces of production manifest this historical tendency because of certain facts of human nature and the human condition: rationality, historical scarcity, and a degree of intelligence that allows people “to improve their situation”:

Given their rationality, and their inclement situation, when knowledge provides the opportunity of expanding productive power they will tend to take it, for not to do so would be irrational. In short, we put it as a reason for affirming the development thesis that its falsehood would offend human rationality.¹⁰

Cohen admits that what is rational is not always immediately implemented by society. However, history demonstrates the growth of the productive forces and “societies rarely replace a given set of productive forces by an inferior one.”¹¹

Cohen acknowledges that the materialist theory of history rests on a kind of “functional explanation.” The actual mechanism by which productive forces select appropriate relations of production is not specified by Marx but Cohen insists that it need not be specified for historical materialism to be *logically* defensible. He points to the analogous statement that “birds have hollow bones because hollow bones facilitate flight” as a functional explanation that is acceptable although it does not specify the mechanism that caused the development of hollow bones.¹² In this example, Darwin eventually provided the missing causal link through the theory of natural selection. Cohen suggests that Marxists have not yet provided similar mechanisms for elaborating their theses but they are as logically defensible as the statement about birds before we knew exactly how it is that birds came to have hollow bones.

Cohen’s elaboration and defense of the key theses of historical materialism are directly relevant to the present topic in the following way. In Cohen’s portrayal of historical materialism class struggle does not have the central role in historical change sometimes ascribed to it. Relations of production persist if they further the development of the forces of production. Ruling classes are therefore only in power to the extent that their particular interest coincides with the universal interest.¹³ When the relations of production fetter the forces of production, a ruling class will certainly resist the introduction of new relations but the ruling class will fail. This must be true if there is indeed an autonomous tendency in history for the forces of production to develop—if the Development Thesis is true and history is a “coherent story” in the manner argued by Marx.

Cohen strongly insists that he is not a “breakdown” theorist; he does not believe that capitalism will fall without the mediation of class struggle.

[S]ocialism 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.¹⁴

However, the level of the forces of production ultimately decides when a revolution will be successful or not. “Hence to say, as some Marxists do,

that 'class struggle is the motor of history,' is to abandon historical materialism."¹⁵ History cannot be explained by class struggle.¹⁶ Rather, history is explained by the fettering of the forces of production by existing relations of production and by the Primacy Thesis, that when fettering occurs the existing relations of production will be replaced by those appropriate to further development. The contrary position is utopian.

Cohen's clarification of historical materialism has been criticized on several grounds: he employs an abstract because unsituated notion of rational action, he neglects the conditions necessary for a revolutionary class to attain the capacity to overthrow the ruling class even when the forces are fettered, and, in trying to support the Primacy Thesis, he consequently misconceives the relationship between forces of production and relations of production. In regard to the first, Andrew Levine and Erik Olin Wright dispute the idea that the impetus behind the historical development of the productive forces is the "rational adaptive practices" of human beings.¹⁷ They argue instead that particular class relations in a specific historical situation always structure individual interests and rationality. The class relations within which persons are situated may actually make it rational *not* to pursue actions which would develop the forces of production. For example, within feudal relations a "rational peasant" would probably have preferred stagnation without exploitation by feudal lords to progress with exploitation. "Class-specific notions of scarcity and rationality" embodied in relations of production always crucially mediate the development of the productive forces.¹⁸

Robert Brenner elaborates the class-specific rationality argument in his analysis of the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe. First of all, he reminds us that only capitalist relations create a situation in which producers are forced to increase the forces of production. Within pre-capitalist relations, lords and peasants had nonmarket access to means of production and to means of subsistence. "[P]roducers will find it in their rational self-interest to specialize only under capitalist property relations, and then *only because they have no choice* but to produce competitively for the market."¹⁹ Since neither lords nor peasants were dependent on the market, there was no competitive pressure to increase the forces of production.

Secondly, Brenner argues that precapitalist relations were actually structured such that the interests of individuals of both classes encouraged them to actively resist changes that would be necessary for economic growth.²⁰ Obtaining food supplies through the market was uncertain because of low agricultural productivity. Peasants therefore found it rational

to diversify rather than specialize in cash crop production, marketing at most specific agricultural surpluses. "The resulting tendency to production for subsistence naturally constituted a powerful barrier to commercial specialization and ultimately the transformation of production."²¹ On the other side, the lords also had nonmarket access to means of production from their own land and their extra-economic appropriation from the peasants. They therefore did not have to compete in production. Due to the absence of a class of landless laborers who could serve as tenants or wage laborers, a lord would not find it in his self-interest to expropriate his peasants (nor easy, in any case). Also, lords would find it irrational to devote their resources to bettering productive techniques because of the supervisory costs of a labor force that would have no economic incentive to "work diligently or efficiently" (they could not be "fired").

Under such conditions, it made little sense for the lords to allocate their income toward investment in the means of production. They found it rational instead to direct their resources toward various forms of unproductive (though reproductively effective) *consumption*.²²

The lords's situation led them to invest any surplus in military capacity, to maintain their hold on the peasants and to resist the predations of other lords, rather than investing in superior productive forces.

What is rational and what is not is therefore only established within specific class relations. "[P]roperty relations, once established, will determine the economic course of action which is rational for the direct producers and the exploiters."²³ From this Brenner concludes that "pre-capitalist economies have an internal logic and solidity which should not be underestimated" and that "capitalist economic development is perhaps an historically more limited, surprising and peculiar phenomenon than is often appreciated." He suggests that the transition to capitalism may actually have been a result of "unintended consequences."²⁴

Assertions of a transhistorical interest in development embodied in human rationality are therefore insufficient to maintain the Development Thesis. Due to the structuring of rational action by specific property relations, action within determinant class structures are central to explaining the course of history. As we will see later, variants of the class-specific rationality argument are the basis for many of the conclusions of analytical Marxists and also for Brenner's rebuttal of world-system theory.

A second criticism of Cohen's interpretation of historical materialism is that a crucial link is missing in his argument. Levine and Wright con-

tend that mere incompatibility of the forces of production and existing relations of production is not enough to produce revolutionary change that would institute more favorable relations of production. Incompatibility is not the same as contradiction. The latter requires "endogenously generated imperatives for change" that only exist if a class emerges that is capable of both destroying the old ruling class and of organizing the productive forces anew.

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 ruling class exists or will be generated depends not upon a dynamic vested in the forces of production, but in the specific historical forms of the social relations of production.²⁵

This raises the issue of "class capacities," the "organizational, ideological, and material resources available to classes in class struggle." If these capacities are not forthcoming, then incompatibility can simply result in "permanent stagnation."

Levine and Wright argue that the central problem of a materialist theory of history is to show how interests in change promoted by the fettering of the forces of production "are translated into social and political practices."²⁶ In contrast, Cohen suggests that class interests will more or less unproblematically call forth class capacities. For example, Cohen argues that as the productive forces stagnate, the ruling class will lose its allies while the rising class will gain support. "The maladies of capitalism and the development of the forces under it stimulate proletarian militancy."²⁷

Levine and Wright criticize this position in two ways. First, they note that the persuasiveness of Cohen's argument is substantially undercut by his rejection of the labor theory of value, on which traditional Marxian crisis theory depends.²⁸ Without it, there is no obvious reason to believe that capitalist crises grow worse with time. To this we can immediately add that even if the problems of capitalism do increase in intensity, unless class capacities are developed, any militancy that may result from economic stresses will not be *proletarian* militancy but rather violent struggles of an all too familiar kind.

Secondly, Levine and Wright argue that an existing ruling class and its relations of production may be maintained just as much by disruption of oppositional class capacities. The capitalist mode of production itself contains tendencies which seriously undermine the class capacities of the proletariat.

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 the working class and its (potential) allies, and mechanisms of ideological domination and deflection.²⁹

Cohen does not elucidate how these divisions will be overcome and therefore does not provide convincing arguments on why these class capacities will emerge. To this extent, his interpretation of the theses of historical materialism is at least incomplete.

Levine and Wright's position is again strengthened by Brenner's analysis of the historical transition from feudalism to capitalism. Brenner rejects the idea that commercialization (the rise of trade) or population increase ("secular Malthusianism") explains the transition.³⁰ These "economic/determinist" arguments fail when one looks at comparative historical evidence which shows that commercialization and population increase had different impacts in different parts of Europe.³¹ Instead, Brenner presents a kind of class capacities argument. The reason for the differential impact of these forces is to be found in the existing class relations and the "relatively autonomous processes of class conflict."³² The relative strengths of the contending classes decided what the impact of commercialization or demographic changes would be; i.e., these forces were refracted through the existing class relations. Moreover, the strength of the peasants depended especially on the particular structure of the village community (the development of independent political institutions), and the ability of peasants to obtain political codification of the village community.³³ Therefore, it is political relations and class struggle that actually determined whether feudal relations would be supplanted by capitalist relations and consequently whether the forces of production would increase. John Roemer notes that Brenner's analysis "turns classic historical materialism on its head. It is not the level of development of the productive forces that determines the economic structure, but class power that determines property relations, which in turn determine the speed of development of the productive forces."³⁴

These considerations restore the centrality of class struggle to the explanation of why certain relations of production prevail at particular times and places. The historical interaction of forces of production and relations of production is mediated by the class-specific rationality engendered by property relations in specific circumstances and also by the class capacities of the contending forces. If this is true, Levine and Wright argue,

“then it is not the case that the existing relations of production are functionally explained by their tendency to promote the development of the productive forces. They may be just as fundamentally explained by their tendency to undermine the capacity of rival classes to become effective political forces.”³⁵

In the face of these and similar arguments Cohen has clarified his interpretation of historical materialism. First, he responds to Levine and Wright’s criticism of the view that the tendency of the forces of production to develop is a direct consequence of transhistorical “rational adaptive practices” of human beings. Cohen states that he did not intend to imply that rationality in the development of the productive forces (the ‘search and select process’) is applied directly to the productive forces themselves. Instead, people rationally select *relations of production* which further the development of the productive forces.³⁶ He agrees that there may be periods of ruling class resistance to the introduction of new productive forces and states that in pre-capitalist societies, productive increase may merely occur within the existing relations of production, not because of them, as in capitalism. He now presents what he calls the “Weaker Development Thesis,” that for cultural and other reasons whole societies may lack an endogenous tendency to increase the productive forces but that the Development Thesis may still be true from a global perspective.³⁷ Finally, Cohen concedes that historical materialism only applies to periods of “epochal development,” thereby limiting its “political applicability.”³⁸

However Cohen’s fundamental response to his critics is, first, that although “economic and political structures are not unproblematically congenial to progress,” development of the forces of production has taken place. In fact, “the *greater* the propensity of social structures to throw up rationality problems is,” the stronger the argument that development of the productive forces ultimately depends on the transhistorical “facts that people are rational, innovative, and afflicted by scarcity.” If one rejects this, one must produce another explanation for the “frequency of progress and infrequency of regress.”³⁹

Secondly, against those who insist on the historical importance of class capacities, Cohen vigorously restates his main point: classes do not create the conditions which occasion their struggles. “[W]hen Marx called on the workers to revolutionize society he was not asking them to bring about what would explain their doing so: the exhaustion of the progressive capacity of the capitalist order, and the availability of enough productive power to install a socialist one.”⁴⁰ Cohen’s position is clearly formulated in his response to Jon Elster’s suggestion that game theory would be help-

ful to Marxian theory in that the Marxian theory of history “centres on exploitation, struggle, alliances, and revolution.” Cohen argues that “the items on Elster’s list are the actions at the center of the historical process, but for Marxism there are also items more basic than actions at its center.”⁴¹ Although “class struggle is always essential for social transformation,” this does not imply that class struggle determines the course of history.⁴² Classes will emerge to successfully overthrow the existing relations of production only when the forces of production have been fettered by these relations.

The vicissitudes of class struggle decide just *when* a ruling class is supplanted, once a superior social order is objectively possible. But if one goes beyond that and says that the vicissitudes of class struggle decide whether or not the ruling class is supplanted at all, so that there is no objectively grounded answer to the question of whether it will, in the end, go, then one denies the parameters within which, for Marxism, class struggle operates.⁴³

As Cohen argues in various places, if nothing else the class struggle perspective begs the question of why the weaker class is weak.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, Cohen admits that if historical materialism is to be a persuasive theory, the functional explanations of historical materialism must be fleshed out by linking them to actions, the “proximate causes of social effects.”⁴⁵

In a more recent elaboration of these issues Wright, Levine, and Elliott Sober acknowledge that the historical development of the productive forces is at least “sticky downward” and present several arguments for why this may be the case.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, they deny that there is a tendency toward the selection of “optimal” economic relations. They conclude that the tentativeness of the emergence of class capacities makes “suboptimal outcomes” in “unfettering” the forces of production more likely. “It is class struggle that, in the end, determines whether and how we move along the map the theory provides.”⁴⁷ On these grounds Wright, Levine, and Sober propose a version of historical materialism they call “weak historical materialism,” in which “the forces of production only determine a range of possible sets of relations of production; selections within this range are determined by historically contingent causes that bear particularly on the capacities of class actors to transform the relations.”⁴⁸

One thing on which Cohen and Wright, Levine, and Sober agree is that the kind of empirical evidence that would test the theory of historical materialism is unclear at present.⁴⁹ It is worth noting here that another participant in this discussion, Alan Carling, develops a further version of the

Primacy Thesis that he believes *is* empirically testable. Carling calls his thesis "Competitive Primacy," arguing that when there is competition between two systems of production relations, the one that has promoted a higher level of the productive forces will "prevail" over the system with the lower level. This version of primacy of the forces of production is "deliberately less ambitious" than Cohen's in that it does not require that forces of production select propitious relations in every society. It more modestly states that when there is competition, the society with relations that result in a higher level of productive forces will prevail.⁵⁰ One can therefore reasonably propose that history shows a "bias" toward development of the productive forces, grounded in the at least episodic competition between societies with different relations of production and differing levels of productive forces. "Perhaps all that can be said is that history exhibits a *bias* imparted by Competitive Primacy; a bias weaker than a tendency but considerably stronger than nothing at all."⁵¹

At first glance Carling's perspective is indeed promising for empirically testing the materialist theory of history. However it actually reveals a major limitation of the discussion thus far. When one considers the kinds of productive forces that would allow one set of relations to prevail over another, it appears that Carling's Competitive Primacy is at base a variant of social Darwinism. One major weakness of social Darwinism is that it conflates success with other kinds of superiority. In this way it reduces the theoretical space for evaluating the capacities that are being selected and rewarded.

A similar closing of theoretical space occurs in the preceding discussion. It is assumed that if class capacities emerge when the forces of production are fettered, then revolution will ensue. The meaning of "fettering" and its obverse, "development," has been taken to be tolerably clear. Carling's contribution to the analysis of historical materialism inadvertently reveals that the discussion thus far begs the question of which productive forces are being fettered and the related issue of what "optimal relations of production" means. However, revolutionary motivation depends crucially on the meaning of fettering itself, that is, under what conditions will large numbers of people regard the forces of production as fettered? Asking this question threatens to introduce paralyzing complications for the theses of historical materialism. However, not asking the question would reduce historical materialism to irrelevance for the most important social questions. At the least, discussion of the issue directly opens a much broader perspective on the role of class struggle in the Marxian theory of history.

FETTERING

Fettering of the forces of production can imply several different things. For example, it can mean that the rational use of existing forces is blocked by the relations of production (“use-incompatibility”) or that the possible further development of the forces of production is obstructed by existing relations (“development-incompatibility”). Wright, Levine, and Sober argue that Cohen employs both notions in his interpretation of historical materialism but usually stresses development fettering.⁵² Three other possibilities are decline of the productive forces, sub-optimal use, and sub-optimal development.

In a more recent essay Cohen explores the multiple meanings of fettering. He notes that the ambiguity stems from the word development itself, in both English and German (*entwickeln*). Develop can mean either “improve” or to “bring to fruition.” He also agrees with those who argue that Development Fettering is less likely to motivate revolutionary action than Use Fettering, on the grounds that the former is probably less “perceptible” than a “discrepancy between capacity and use.”⁵³

However, rather than choosing between the two, Cohen proposes a notion of fettering that draws on both use and development.

[L]ook neither merely at how fast they [“economic systems”] develop the forces of production nor merely at how well they use them but at the trajectories they promise of *used productive power*, which is a multiple of level of development and degree of use. And call a system *fettering* if, given both the rate at which it develops the forces and how well it uses them, the amount of productive power it harnesses at given future times is less than what some alternative feasible system would harness. That is the Net Fettering proposal.⁵⁴

For example, one could argue that although capitalism develops new generations of computing power more quickly than a socialist system, a socialist system could be preferred on the grounds that it uses the productive capacity more fully than capitalism.⁵⁵

However, the idea of Net Fettering raises the clear possibility that the opposite might be true. If capitalism develops forces of production more quickly than socialism, then even if capitalism only uses a percentage of the productive power created it could still be superior in regard to Net Fettering. Due to compounding of development, capitalism would soon have a larger base on which its percentage of use would proceed. It would therefore overtake a socialist society that fully used all of its productive capaci-

ty but developed it at a slower rate. In this example, capitalist society would still be superior in net of utilized productive power due to the developmental dimension.⁵⁶

Wright, Levine, and Sober reject the Net Fettering proposal for the reason that it remains less likely to motivate revolution than simple use-fettering. The idea of a use/development trajectory is still more difficult to project than the simpler notion that there are existing capacities that are at present unused due to the existing relations of production.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, even if this is true of potential revolutionary motivations, it does not answer Cohen's point regarding the reality of the longterm trajectory of the productive forces if capitalism is indeed superior in development of the productive forces. In this case one must ask how enduring a revolution would be if a socialist society would have to compete with a capitalist one. Elimination of the theoretical importance of development fettering is not so easy to accomplish.

At this point Cohen expands the discussion by stating that there are other criteria for preferring socialism than only this one, specifically "justice" and more "qualitative" aspects of social life. This pointedly introduces new complications to the topic of fettering. We must specify which objective capacities are being fettered, i.e., further development and/or use of which capacities for what ends? In this regard Cohen defines a social "contradiction" as the situation in which "a society's economic organization frustrates the optimal use and development of its accumulated productive power, when prospects opened by its productive forces are closed by its production relations."⁵⁸ He argues that capitalism is contradictory in this sense. Capitalism greatly increases the productivity of labor, opening two broad possibilities: increased output and stimulated consumption or increased leisure. However, profits depend on increased consumption, therefore capitalism consistently blocks the prospects of "toil reduction."⁵⁹ Historically this bias toward output was progressive, laying the basis for rapid growth and for reducing scarcity.

But as scarcity recedes the same bias renders the system reactionary. It cannot realize the possibilities of liberation it creates. It excludes liberation by febrile product innovation, huge investments in sales and advertising, contrived obsolescence. 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.⁶⁰

Cohen argues that the "distinctive contradiction" of advanced capitalism is therefore not "underdeployment of resources" but rather their "grotesque

overdeployment in some directions and injurious underdeployment in others.”

A more “qualitative” evaluation can admit that capitalism is more productive but prefer socialism on the grounds that it promises “a better way of life.”⁶¹ However, Cohen goes beyond mere evaluation to suggest that this is the reason that capitalism will be replaced. “There is much disagreement within Marxism about why capitalism then becomes untenable. In my view, it is ultimately because people no longer have to labour in the traditional sense that they can no longer be made to labour for capitalists.”⁶² Wright, Levine, and Sober point out that Cohen’s view of fettering and contradiction is therefore not blockage of development but “irrational deployment” of existing resources.⁶³

From this perspective the notions of fettering, compatibility, and optimality are crucially dependent on an idea of the rational deployment of productive capacity from the standpoint of human preferences. Cohen himself indicates a serious problem with this position. Cohen quite rightly argues that human preferences are conditioned by knowledge of alternatives. People may not choose leisure if the society in which they live has stifled the “theory and practice of leisure.” “And this further manifestation of the output bias adds to the explanation of general acquiescence in it. Free time looks empty when the salient available ways of filling it are inane.”⁶⁴ But if this is true, the movement toward a qualitatively better society becomes considerably more problematic. If the concept of fettering must include human preferences, then whether forces are fettered or not depends on people having the opportunity to rationally assess alternatives. However this is not immediately possible because people live in a system in which the alternatives are not impartially presented.

The collective determination of preferences must be a part of the concept of fettering insofar as people’s preferences determine exactly what are the important available objective capacities that are being obstructed. The prospects for socialism therefore depend on a struggle for the constitution of an arena in which such a discourse can unfold. In sum, pushing the topic of fettering in this direction ultimately explodes the objectivistic approach of much of the discussion of compatibility, optimality, and fettering.

The question of preferences is crucially related to one other very important element that must be present for objective capacities to exist: a “feasible alternative set of relations.” The above considerations shift the ground of the argument from incompatibility of forces and relations of production in a specific historical system to an evaluation of the relative capacities of alternative systems for advancing the productive forces. The

importance of a feasible alternative is often brought out when Development Fettering is being discussed but it is also true that Use Fettering requires conceiving a feasible, even if counterfactual, set of relations.⁶⁵ The issue of a workable socialist society must therefore be considered part of the concept of fettering itself in that objective capacities only exist if a feasible alternative exists. Furthermore, the plausibility of the alternative, as we know all too well at this point, clearly influences people's preferences.

From the foregoing it is obvious that the concepts of fettering and development have irreducibly subjective and normative aspects that have not been fully integrated into the theory of historical materialism. It is possible that these aspects cannot be accounted for at the level of abstraction at which such a theory of history must proceed. From their own perspective, Wright, Levine, and Sober conclude that the existence of different historical trajectories based on variable class capacities, along with other considerations, makes the normative defense of socialism inescapable. "It is now clear that the reluctance of traditional Marxism to do so was naive and even pernicious."⁶⁶ This is a position shared by a great many recent Marxists, including, as we shall see in a different context, Cohen himself. It is true that this position contains the danger that the normative dimension will be emphasized too much and socialism will be conceived as merely a matter of ethical decision.⁶⁷ Since a renewed emphasis on the normative dimension of societal conflict is one of the defining characteristics of recent Marxian theory, further examination of this topic will be reserved until later.

At this point the analysis of the principal theses of historical materialism has clarified one immediate question. Cohen and Wright, Levine, and Sober agree that class struggle has an important role to play if Marx's theory of history is true, although they disagree on the extent of this role. If class struggle is not the motor of history it is at least its necessary transmission. Wright, Levine, and Sober are particularly persuasive that class capacities may be disrupted by existing relations of production and other institutions and processes. If the insurgent class does not develop such capacities, the unfettering of the forces of production (in any interpretation of fettering) is unlikely. If we cannot specify the conditions under which classes will achieve such capacities, then it appears that history is indeed, to borrow Cohen's phrase, not "objectively grounded."

Many recent Marxian theorists have seized on these perplexities in the Marxian theory of history in order to reject the key ideas of historical materialism while still maintaining some kind of anti-capitalist perspective. Marxists like Wright, however, have responded by attempting to es-

establish the conceptual links between class structure and the emergence of class actors in order to theoretically clarify those aspects of contemporary capitalism that obstruct the development of class capacities. This is a necessary first step in formulating a political strategy for collective anti-capitalist action.

Using this approach, the immediate task is to examine what the concept the proletariat itself means in light of various developments in advanced capitalism. The preceding discussion demonstrates the importance of the role of the proletariat in keeping historical materialist theory from disintegrating. However, recent theory has actually been hard-pressed to keep the concept of the proletariat itself from disintegrating. It is to these arguments that we can now turn.