An Interview with Jerry Cohen

Simon Tormey

This interview was conducted before Jerry Cohen’s death in August 2009.

Simon Tormey: Jerry, many thanks for agreeing to be interviewed. I wonder if I could start by asking you about the project for which you are perhaps best known: analytical Marxism. What became of the project – and should we regard it as a success or a failure?

Jerry Cohen: In the beginning, there was Robert Brenner, Robert-Jan van der Veen, Philippe Van Parijs, Hillel Steiner, Erik Olin Wright, myself, and some others. When we originally met, the work was very Marxism centred. Bob Brenner wrote about issues of transition from feudalism to capitalism. Of course, Bob Brenner has continued to be very Marxist, even in his most recent extraordinarily ambitious books about contemporary capitalism. Van der Veen was writing about exploitation, so was Philippe Van Parijs, so was I – as of course was John Roemer. And everybody was committed to the application of analytical standards to the corpus of and the development of Marxist and left-wing thought. In some cases that meant analytical philosophy, in other cases it meant neo-classical economic techniques. I suppose that the people in the group looked inward to the Marxist heritage itself and outward to the world and to issues that engaged people other than Marxists in all kinds of different ways. Gradually a great deal of the Marxian corpus was eroded by careful attempts to decide what could be kept and what had to go. But in addition that process of purification led to a loss of an essentially Marxist orientation. For example, in the normative domain it came to be thought by many of us that exploitation, while a very important concept, was essentially secondary, normatively speaking, to the concept of equality. We therefore have to
be egalitarian and investigate what that implies. And then there will be certain consequences for what you are going to call ‘exploitative’ relations. That’s why so many of us began to discuss equality, rather than exploitation.

In addition to that intellectual trajectory, there was also a political trajectory. The year 1989 saw the collapse of the communist world. Although nobody in the group was a friend of the communist world in their attitude to it, many of us, I think, experienced the Soviet Union – hideous though it was in many respects – as a non-capitalist space onto which you could project many aspirations and reflections about how you might run a planned economy in a more democratic way with more liberal freedoms and so forth. So it was very important. I remember when the Soviet Union collapsed, Sam Bowles, who is a member of the group (he joined in 1987), said: ‘We’re partying’. I thought that was a very superficial response to the collapse of the Soviet Union, because with the disappearance of the rival to capitalism comes the axiomatization of the absence of alternatives to capitalism. I don’t remember when I began to realize that once capitalism got into serious difficulties, thinking about alternatives to it could be more imaginative and freer because people wouldn’t be stigmatized by saying, ‘Look what the alternative is: the Soviet Union’, which I think to some extent is now true.

Two members of the group left in the wake of 1989: Adam Przeworski and Jon Elster. Neither gave as their expressed reason that there had been this collapse of socialism, but I think this was a factor – and I disagreed with each of them. Przeworski said, ‘I’m leaving because we decided to get together in order to find out what was true in Marxism. We discovered that very little was, and now there’s little else to do.’ I found that monstrously arrogant because he wasn’t there at the foundation and it wasn’t for him to say whether other people wanted to stay together or not. He meant that he was leaving because the group no longer had a rationale. But that’s absolute rubbish because the group continues to have a rationale being a number of people from different academic disciplines who have a radical orientation and who can fertilize each other’s thoughts. There’s still a great deal of interesting work that goes on, although it takes a different form. It’s much less Marxist in its scope. For instance, one of the things that Seana Shiffrin, who is a new member of the group, has been working on is the way credit card companies rip people off and how they phrase the loan obligations. She’s done a lot of legal work on that. Well, it’s obvious that it has a radical character. It’s equally obvious that compared to ‘the contradictions