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The Shifting Primacy Puzzle. A Rejoinder

Abstract: One important claim of G.A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History* is that only its functional interpretation of historical materialism can solve the "primacy puzzle", i.e. can reconcile the primacy of the productive forces with the controlling role of the production relations. Cohen's recent "Reply to Four Critics" (in this journal) does not salvage this claim against my earlier critique that it is either false or trivial. He only avoids falsehood by substantially redefining the terms of the puzzle. And with the redefined puzzle, the claim becomes trivial in the sense that one of the two terms which the primacy puzzle consists in reconciling requires a functional interpretation on its own. The "Veblenian scenario" which I put forward in my earlier text and whose full force Cohen has been prevented from appreciating by two misunderstandings, illustrates what I claim to be the general solution to the only genuine primacy puzzle.

1. In his (expectedly) clarifying but uncompromising reply to my earlier article in this journal (Van Parijs 1982), G.A. Cohen recognizes the importance of distinguishing the two senses in which historical materialism explains the production relations by the productive forces. But he denies my main contention, namely that making this distinction catches one of the central claims of his book - the claim that a functional interpretation of historical materialism is required to solve to so-called primacy puzzle - in a dilemma between falsehood and triviality (Cohen 1983, 195-206). In this brief rejoinder, I shall first show that he was only able to escape the first branch of this dilemma by significantly modifying the terms of the "primacy puzzle". Next, I shall clarify the damaging sense in which his solution to the modified puzzle fails to escape the second branch of the dilemma. And finally, I shall clear up two misunderstandings (for which I am partly responsible) which have helped prevent him from appreciating the full cogency of my particular counterexample.

2. "The primacy puzzle", Cohen (1983, 201) states, "is to reconcile the explanatory priority of the forces with the controlling role of the relations". And he makes it absolutely clear that the "explanatory primacy" refers to the explanation of the relations by the current level of the

forces, and not to the explanation of the relations by their tendency to promote the development of the forces. For the primary thesis, I quote, asserts that "(2) the nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces" (ibid.)¹. At first sight, therefore, there is no significant difference between Cohen's current conception of the primacy puzzle and the one I ascribe to him (in the preferred interpretation) in my critique (Van Parijs 1983, 204-205). There are, however, two major differences.

Firstly, compared to his earlier formulation of the primacy thesis (Cohen 1978, 134) and to my interpretation of it (Van Parijs 1982, 200), Cohen has now dropped the requirement that "the nature of a set of relations [be] explained by the level of development of the productive forces embraced by it (to a far greater extent than vice versa)" (my emphasis), and he charges me of having paid too much attention to the latter qualifying phrase (Cohen 1983, fn 8). In the absence of such a phrase, however, it becomes altogether unclear how any primacy is asserted by the "primacy thesis", as defined above. For whether production relations are viewed as the source of productive development or only as profoundly affecting it (see Cohen 1983, section 2), it can be said that "the level of development of the productive forces of a society is explained by the nature of its production relations". In other words, the "primacy thesis" can be turned round - which amounts to saying, as primacy should at the very least imply antisymmetry, that there is no primacy at all in Cohen's (fully clarified) reconstruction of historical materialism². In my critique of Cohen, on the other hand, I did seriously try to make sense of the "qualifying phrase". I interpreted it as referring to the fact that, when there is "contradiction" or "non-correspondence" between relations and forces - as defined by "correspondence tables" such as that proposed by Cohen (1978, 198) and quoted in Van Parijs (1982, fn 10) -, the former are expected to adjust to the latter, and never the other way around (ibid. 204-205). I still believe that this is the only sensible way in which the primacy asserted by historical materialism - including Cohen's (1978) reconstruction of it - can be understood. The clarification he offers in his reply implies that his current view is very different indeed.

Secondly, there is no less significant a shift in what the primacy thesis is to be reconciled with. In his initial definition of the primacy puzzle (recalled above), Cohen (1983, 201) only talks of the "controlling role of the relations", fully in tune with his earlier formulations (Cohen 1978, 278; 1980, 129-130; etc). A few lines down, however, he announces that he is going to "restate" the primacy puzzle, and the latter's second term then suddenly becomes: "(5) The existing relations promote the development of productive power" (Cohen 1983, 202). This statement is surprising on two counts. Firstly, it is undisputably much more specific than the mere ascription of a "controlling role" or a "causal power" to relations - which

it is supposed to restate. Secondly, as it stands, it does not make sense as part of a reconstruction of historical materialism. Indeed, a historical materialist is committed to the view that the existing relations sometimes fetter the development of productive power. I therefore assume (safely I believe) that (5) should be understood, and is meant by Cohen, as a shorthand for the (definitely historical-materialist) assertion of a systematic tendency for the existing relations to promote the development of productive power. As it happens, such an assertion is identified earlier by Cohen (1983, 200) as: "(ET2) There is a tendency for those relations to be selected which are best (or facilitate) the development of the forces". The substitution of (ET2) for its shorthand expression (5) makes it even plainer that the primacy puzzle, as now understood by Cohen, consists in reconciling the primacy of the forces with much more than the controlling role of the relations³.

3. Since for Cohen the primacy puzzle consists in reconciling (2) with (5), while I understood him as trying to reconcile something stronger than (2) - genuine primacy - with something weaker than (5) - control by the relations -, it is not very surprising that we should disagree about the range of possible solutions. Indeed, I do agree that if one phrases the puzzle as Cohen now does, his unrepentantly repeated claim that "the only way to solve the primacy puzzle [is] to represent the relations as functionally explained by the forces" (Cohen 1983, 201) is not demonstrably false. I say "not demonstrably false", and not "true", because it is debatable whether one can be said to solve a puzzle - which consists in reconciling two statements - when the proposed solution is entailed by one of the two statements on its own. And this is precisely the case with Cohen's "solution" to his own (re)formulation of the puzzle. True, barring "remarkable coincidence" (Cohen 1983, 205), it is impossible to hold (2) and (5) without representing the explanation of relations as a functional explanation. But this has nothing to do with (2), nor therefore with the reconciliation of (2) with (5). (5) on its own, when explicated as (ET2), commits us (leaving out flukes) to a functional interpretation. As soon as one is willing to assert the existence of a systematic tendency for those relations to be selected which are best for productive development, one will also have to assert that the relations which tend to prevail do so because they are best for productive development, i.e. one will have to endorse a functional explanation⁴. Statement (2), which asserts that the nature of the relations is explained by the level of the forces, plays no role whatsoever in this derivation⁵.

Consequently, in so far as one can talk at all of the functional interpretation of historical materialism as a "solution" to the problem of reconciling (2) and (5), the claim that only such an explanation can solve this problem becomes plainly trivial in the sense⁶ that one of the two terms which the problem consists in reconciling implies on its own that a functional ex-

planation should be present. Avoiding such triviality obviously implies a weakening of (5) into the mere assertion of control (however massive) of the forces by the relations. The problem then reduces to conceiving of two-way causation, one of which is instantiated by the "Veblenian scenario" I offered as a counterexample in my earlier text (Van Parijs 1982, 206-207). From trivial, Cohen's claim that a functional interpretation is required then becomes false. Of course, in so far as it implies, "together with other considerations" (Cohen 1983, 201), the truth of (ET₂), bringing in the development thesis, as Cohen (1983, 205) suggests, would salvage the validity of his claim. But no less obviously, we would then be back to triviality in the precise sense spelt out above⁷. Shifting the puzzle by reinterpreting its terms or by bringing in new elements will not do. There is no way out of Cohen's dilemma.

4. This is not to say, however, that the primacy puzzle cannot be given an interesting interpretation, nor that, on such an interpretation, the functional interpretation of historical materialism does not constitute a particularly interesting solution to it. But the primacy puzzle must then be construed, as I did in my earlier article, as a challenge to reconcile a genuine primacy of the forces over the relations (in the precise sense recalled in § 2 above) with the causal power of the relations over the forces. The solution of this puzzle does not require a functional interpretation. To show this, I made up, freely following Veblen, the following counterexample. Suppose the level of development of the productive forces, due to the type of technology it is associated with, determines (allowing for adjustment lags) the nature of the relations of production, by moulding mental habits in specific ways. The forms of relations which prevail as a result do have a significant influence on further productive development, though not always a favourable one. Some forms foster the maintenance of the currently used technology, others favour progressive technological changes, others still rather encourage regression to a type of technology corresponding to a lower level of productive development. Anyway, whether a particular form of production relations is favourable or unfavourable to the development of the productive forces is irrelevant to its rise and to its persistence at the current level of development of the productive forces (though of course not to how fast one will move to another such level, at which the current form of relations will soon be displaced). For what determines the rise and persistence of production relations is the moulding of mental habits, not the selection of those relations which are best for productive development.

In this scenario, the two terms of the (genuine) primacy puzzle are present. Firstly, there is a primacy of the forces over the relations in the following sense: it is possible to draw a table of correspondence between levels of forces (or types of technology) and forms of relations, and whenever there is a contradiction, or a lack of correspondence, between forces

and relations, it is predicted that the latter will adjust to the former (via the moulding of mental habits). Secondly, there is also a "controlling role" of the relations, in the sense that they deeply affect what happens to the forces. Nonetheless, no functional explanation is involved. Note, however, that a functional explanation would necessarily be involved if either of the two terms which I have just said were present in the scenario were meant in a stronger sense - as Cohen thinks is the case. Firstly, if by "contradiction" were meant a state of affairs in which the relations fetter the forces, then, as Cohen (1983, 204) correctly points out, the claim that whenever there is contradiction the relations adjust does indeed commit us (barring appeal to "accident") to a functional interpretation. Nowhere in my article, however, have I given to the term "contradiction" more than the much weaker meaning recalled above⁸. Secondly, if by the "controlling power" of the relations were meant the systematic promotion of the forces by the relations, we would of course once again (barring "accident") be committed to a functional interpretation. What I assumed in the scenario, however, is not that "the prevailing relations further the development of the forces" (Cohen 1983, 205), but only that they may do so (Van Parijs 1982, 207). Once these two points are clarified, it is obvious that no functional explanation is required to make sense of the scenario, nor therefore to solve the (genuine) primacy puzzle. Of course, the scenario does not satisfy the development thesis. But as pointed out above (§ 3), bringing the latter in, which implies on its own the need for a functional explanation, would amount to trivializing a potentially interesting claim.

The alternative claim put forward in my article is that the necessary and sufficient condition for the primacy of one variable to be reconciled with the controlling role of a variable subordinated to it is the coexistence of a "fast" and a "slow" dynamics. I realize that the few paragraphs I devoted to presenting it (whether in Van Parijs 1982 or, somewhat more extensively, in Van Parijs 1979) did not succeed in making it readily intelligible. Perhaps the following remarks will help. Suppose that, in the "Veblenian scenario", a particular form of relations (brought about as a result of the moulding of mental habits by a particular type of technology) quickly leads to a new type of technology and then again to another type, before the former has had time to mould mental habits (as it would had it been given sufficient time). If this is the case, it is no longer possible to establish the kind of correspondence tables which is essential, as recalled above, to define the primacy of the forces. Talking in terms of correspondence, contradiction and adjustment of the relations to the forces no longer makes sense. And what has happened is simply a speeding up of the "slow dynamics" (i.e. the causal influence of forms of relations on type of technology), in such a way that the earlier distinction between a "fast dynamics" (which determines equilibrium "correspondence laws") and a "slow dynamics" (which captures the feedback) can no longer be made.

Analogously, take the relation between a species and its environment, Cohen's last resort in his attempt to clarify his notion of primacy⁹. In general, the interaction between species and environment can indeed be captured as the conjunction of a fast dynamics (which accounts for the possibility of "correspondence laws" between features of the environment and features of living populations, with the latter adjusting to the former) and a slow dynamics (the more or less negligible feedback from the populations to the environment). Would there still be an explanatory primacy of the (changing aspects of the) environment over the species, however, if the species (e.g. contemporary man) started affecting the environment at such a pace that each state of the latter is given no time to exert its selection pressures on the genetic characteristics of the former? I think not, as correspondence laws between aspects of the environment and adaptive genetic features would no longer make sense. And the reason why primacy has vanished is again that the distinction between a fast and slow dynamics can no longer be made.

These two examples, I hope, go some way towards making more intuitive what I say when I talk of the coexistence of a slow and a fast dynamics, or when I say that such a coexistence is both necessary and sufficient to reconcile the forces' primacy with the relations' controlling role. Cohen's functional interpretation of historical materialism, which does effect this reconciliation, is just another instance of the same sort of coexistence. But it is a very peculiar instance of it: one which embeds the slow dynamics into the fast one, in the sense that the process by which the level of the forces determines the form of the relations involves the (differential) influence of the latter on the former. Viewing Cohen's interpretation as one particular element in a wider class of possible solutions to the (genuine) primacy puzzle does not undermine its validity nor its interest. Quite the contrary. But it plainly refutes Cohen's claim that his solution is the only possible one.

Notes

- 1 Cohen (1983, 202) claims that this is what he has always meant by the "primacy thesis" and that he has never used that label to designate "(4) The existing relations prevail because of their propensity to promote productive power", which corresponds to my alternative interpretation of it. In his reply, he argues at some length that the passage I quote (Van Parijs 1982, 200) should be understood, not as a clarification of the meaning of the expression, but as a partial clarification of the nature of the primacy of the forces in historical materialism (Cohen 1983, 203). Fair enough. But what does he make of the following passage: "Summarizing, we note several respects in which the relations condition the forces. First, they promote the development of the forces, but that is entailed by the primacy thesis as we presented it: relations obtain when and because they promote development." (Cohen 1978,

165)? Should one be surprised if, of the two possible interpretations I mentioned, so many of Cohen's readers - including, for example, Jon Elster (see Van Parijs 1982, fn 5) - should have picked precisely the wrong one? Moreover, in the reply itself but when discussing another topic (and hence, presumably, off his guard), Cohen indicates twice that he has interpretation (4) in mind. How else could one make sense of the statement that "the primacy thesis implies that when relations are the source of the development of the forces they obtain precisely because they ensure that development" (Cohen 1983, 199)? And a few pages down (ibid. 201), he refers to his book's derivation of "(ET₂) There is a tendency for those relations to be selected which are best for the development of the forces" from the development thesis together with some considerations. If one looks up the page he mentions (Cohen 1978, 158), it turns out that what is there derived from the development thesis and other considerations is the primacy thesis as defined by (5)! The all-important distinction between explanation by level of the forces and explanation by promotion of the forces is once again being blurred.

- 2 Cohen's most elaborate attempt to specify the meaning of "primacy", to which he refers in a footnote (Cohen 1983, fn 8), is very unsatisfactory indeed, precisely because it does not go much beyond "a merely intuitive basis" and does not say explicitly what it is that makes for primacy. Pushing Cohen's attempt further, I maintain, can only yield the explication I propose (see § 4 below).
- 3 The clarity of Cohen's current stance would have been enhanced, had he emphasized this shift from his earlier formulations. Here is a missed opportunity to do so: "But the 'underlying problem' is not to reconcile primacy with two-way causation, but with the particular 'massive control' exercised by the relations" (Cohen 1983, 203, my emphasis), with the latter expression presumably to be understood in terms of (5).
- 4 For a fuller argument, see Van Parijs (1981, 75-77), where the nature of the relations between universal optimalism (the assertion of a systematic tendency for features with optimal consequences to prevail) and the validation of functional explanations (i.e. explanations of those features by these consequences) is spelt out in the particular context of evolutionary biology.
- 5 Compare Cohen (1983, 205): "It is not uninteresting that the primacy of the productive forces requires functional explanation even if it is demonstrable when all the elements of the theory are in place". Cohen's problem stems from the fact that when A and B jointly require C simply because B requires C, it can hardly be true, let alone interesting, to say that A requires C.
- 6 Which, as Cohen (1983, 205) rightly points out, I did not make explicit when using the term (in Van Parijs 1982, 207-208 and fn 11).
- 7 Note, incidentally, that the derivation of ET₂ from ET₁ is by no means as obvious as Cohen (1983, 201) seems to imply by using "since" in ET₃. (The page of KMT which he refers to deals with the derivation of (5), and not ET₂, from ET₁, and is therefore of little help). To use his useful analogy: it is by no means obvious that the existence of an autonomous tendency to grow up implies the existence of a tendency to select those kinds of food which will maximize a child's rate of growth.

- 8 As Cohen (1983, fn 11) mentions, I do indeed use various versions of a stronger notion of contradiction in sections 64 to 67 of my book (Van Parijs 1981, 199-214). In the more relevant earlier article to which Cohen also refers (Van Parijs 1979, 88), however, I make it clear (as I should have done in this article too) that only a weak notion is involved.
- 9 See Cohen (1978, 165-166).

Bibliography

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