

# Is There Less Bullshit in *For Marx* than in *Reading Capital*?

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### Abstract:

This paper explores G. A. Cohen's claim that Althusser's Marxist philosophy is bullshit. This exploration is important because, if we are persuaded by Cohen's assertion that there are only three types of Marxism: analytic, pre-analytic, and bullshit and, further, that only analytic Marxism is concerned with truth and therefore "uniquely legitimate" then, as political philosophers interested in Marxism's potential philosophical resources, we may wish to privilege its analytic form. However, if Cohen's attribution is misplaced, then we may wish to explore why Cohen was so insistent in this ascription and what this insistence reveals about his own political philosophy. The first half of this paper explains what Cohen means by bullshit and it examines the distinction between bullshit and non-bullshit Marxism. The second half explores what the insistent misattribution of the epithet "bullshit Marxism" to Althusser's Marxism reveals about Cohen's own Marxist political philosophy.

### Keywords:

Althusser, G. A. Cohen, bullshit, Marxism, analytic, political, philosophy

This paper explores G. A. Cohen's 1978 claim in the introduction to *Karl Marx's Theory of History [KMTH]* that there is more bullshit in Althusser's contribution to *Reading Capital [RC]* than there is in the essays comprising *For Marx [FM]*.<sup>1</sup> This exploration is important because, if we are persuaded by Cohen's claim that there are only three types of Marxism: analytic, pre-analytic, and bullshit and, further, that only analytic Marxism is concerned with truth and therefore "uniquely legitimate" then, as Marxist philosophers interested in Althusser's classic work between 1960-1965, we may wish to privilege *FM* over *RC*.<sup>2</sup> This is the case as the former may already be analytic or amenable to analytic correction to an extent that the latter, due to its bullshit quotient, is not.

In order to pursue this investigation and to better understand why Cohen identified at least some portion of Althusser's work as bullshit, we will first examine the scattered references to Althusser and "Althusserians" that appear throughout Cohen's writings.<sup>3</sup> Second, we will give

1 Cohen, 2000b, p. x. Cohen calls *Lire le capital* "critically vague," a description that marks the work as bullshit according to at least one of the criteria that Cohen develops.

2 Cohen, 2000a, pp. xxv-xvi, 2013a, p. 123,

3 Though there are considerable theoretical difference between Althusser and those who

an account of what Cohen means when he labels a philosophical argument “bullshit.” Third, we will apply Cohen’s criteria for bullshit to *FM* and Althusser’s contributions to *RC* to see whether his assertion that *FM* has more bullshit than *RC* is true. This done, we should then be in a position to decide whether to privilege *FM* over *RC* because of its closer potential or actual connection to the truth.

### Cohen on Althusser

Like the British historian Tony Judt, Cohen found many opportunities throughout his career to criticize the work of Louis Althusser and of “Althusserians.”<sup>4</sup> It is also clear that, for both the intellectual historian and the political philosopher, there was something in Althusser’s philosophy (and perhaps the attention paid to it) that was unsupportable and which both scholars thought must repeatedly be exposed and decried. While Judt was content to repeatedly invoke the caricature of Althusser and Althusserianism first sketched in his book *Marxism and the French Left*, for Cohen, this founding took the dual form of an autobiographical and a philosophical break.<sup>5</sup>

In the autobiographical version of this break, Cohen tells a tale of attraction to Althusserian ideas and recounts his reading of *Pour Marx* and *Lire le Capital* in their original French editions in 1968.<sup>6</sup> Like the revolutions of that spring, however, this “intoxication” with Althusserian ideas was not to last. The first event that Cohen gives as explanation for this falling out was his realization that the “reiterated affirmation of the value of conceptual rigour was not matched by conceptual rigour in [Althusserian] intellectual practice.”<sup>7</sup> The second experience was an encounter with a “tough American philosopher” who challenged Cohen to explain exactly what he meant when he said that, “in Marx’s view, the rich capitalist’s mistress does not love *him* because of his money: instead she loves the money *itself*.” This philosopher wanted Cohen to explain exactly what

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call themselves Althusserians, we will stick with the rough grained category suggested by Cohen’s usage where the category “Althusserian” includes the theoretical writings of Althusser and anyone whose Marxism Althusser’s reading of Marx has profoundly influenced.

4 Montag, 2013, p. 11.

5 Judt, 1986, pp. 221–233; Riley, 2011.

6 Cohen, 2000b, p. xxi.

7 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxi.

he intended to convey with this phrase and “how one was supposed to go about telling whether or not it was true.”<sup>8</sup> The demand was followed by an admonition to always cover the “ground rules” in a philosophical argument, a reproach that Cohen testifies “hit me hard and sunk in deep.” The internalization of this admonition had the effect of discouraging Cohen thenceforth from “writing...in the fashion of a poet who puts down what sounds good to him and who needn’t defend his lines.” From then on, Cohen shares that he challenged himself to ask of each sentence “precisely what *this* sentence contributes to the developing exposition or argument” and he reasoned that it is only “when you practice that sort of...self-criticism” that you become analytical.”<sup>9</sup>

Like many an autobiographical account, this narrative of enchantment, disenchantment, and growth is a bit too tidy.<sup>10</sup> And, though it tells us something about Cohen’s psychological motivation for contrasting his Marxism to that of Althusser, it is a bit vague on specific criticisms of Althusser’s work. Unfortunately, such criticisms were never made. What we do have, however, are Cohen’s broad characterizations of Althusser’s ideas and methodology as well as concise judgments about the value of some of these ideas and about some of his specific works. In the following paragraphs, we will make use of these remarks to detail the reasons given for the philosophical break with Althusserianism.

Famously, Cohen wrote in the foreword to *KMTH* that he was inspired by Althusser’s *Pour Marx*, which “persuaded [him] that the abidingly important Marx is to be found in *Capital* and the writings preparatory to it.”<sup>11</sup> We also have approbatory remarks from Cohen in the 2002’s “Complete Bullshit” essay about the “Althusserian school” championing the idea of a “conceptually rigorous” Marxism.<sup>12</sup> This is the extent of explicitly positive remarks by Cohen on Althusser and Althusserianism. From the generous remark about *FM* convincing him of *Capital*’s primacy in the foreword to *KMTH*, Cohen proceeds to a disparaging assessment of Althusser’s *RC* as “critically vague” and as an example of “how

8 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxii.

9 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxii.

10 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxii) The encounter with the “tough American philosopher” happened prior to the 1968 publication of (Cohen, 1968) and also prior to Cohen’s reading of *FM* and *RC*.

11 Cohen, 2000b, p. x.

12 Cohen, 2013a, p. 112.

elegantly-and evasively-the French language could be used.”<sup>13</sup> Cohen also makes a first attempt at a sociology of the profession in this introductory section when he attributes this vagueness to the fact that “logical positivism, with its insistence on precision of intellectual commitment, never caught on in Paris.”<sup>14</sup>

From general comments about the lack of lucidity of *RC* and speculations about the reasons for this obscurity, Cohen passes on in *KMTH*'s foreword to a brief discussion of the “doctrinal differences” between Althusserian Marxism and his own. Though brief, the statement reveals something about how Cohen saw the Althusserian project and why he rejected it. The discussion is also useful because, from this point on in his career, Cohen writes little about how his Marxism varies from Althusser's and mostly attacks “Althusserians” for their lack of methodological rigor and clarity. Quantitatively, Cohen judges that the difference between his Marxism and that of the Althusserians is “considerable.” Rather than list all the differences, he chooses to state what his Marxism emphasizes: this is “an old-fashioned historical materialism, a traditional conception, in which history is, fundamentally, the growth of human productive power, and forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impede that growth.” Cohen adds one more hint of what differentiates him from Althusser when he relates that his Marxism does not emphasize “class conflict, ideology, and the state.”<sup>15</sup>

Between the 1978 foreword to *KMTH* and the new introduction to the 2000 re-edition of the volume, Cohen's references to Althusser are scattered. They also lack details as well as supporting arguments and references. For instance, in a footnote from Chapter VII of *KMTH*, Cohen paraphrases an Althusserian argument, signals his assent to its premises and then declares that the premises do not support the conclusion.<sup>16</sup> Later, in the same volume, he references Althusser's concept of “structural causality” as a failed attempt at finding an alternative to functional explanations for socio-economic change. The footnote to this reference then charges Althusser with hypocrisy for employing functional explanation in his account of ideology.<sup>17</sup> Surprisingly, in a set of lecture notes on

13 Cohen, 2000b, p. x.

14 Cohen, 2000b, p. x.

15 Cohen, 2000b, p. x.

16 Cohen, 2000b, pp. 176–77fn.

17 Cohen, 2000b, pp. 279–80.

Hobbes from 1988-89, Cohen makes explicit and apparently favorable references to Althusser's theories of reading and of scientific development when he remarks that “there is game theory in Hobbes, but in a practical untheorized, not made explicit state.”<sup>18</sup>

This reference from the late 1980s is the only positive mention of Althusser in Cohen's oeuvre after 1978 and, along with the negative assessment of structural causality, it is one of the few that explicitly mentions one of Althusser's methods or concepts. It is also the last gesture to Althusser or Althusserians until the series of autobiographical, methodological, and metaphilosophical reflections which began with the new introduction to *KMTH* in 2000, continued with the 2002 essay on “Complete Bullshit,” and that concluded with Cohen's 2008 valedictory address. In each of these writings, Cohen charges Althusser or Althusserians with producing bullshit Marxist philosophy.<sup>19</sup> Though some detail for this charge is given, it is perhaps worthwhile to take a detour into Cohen's analysis of bullshit before looking at the reasons why he charges Althusser with its production. After we understand what Cohen means by bullshit and why he charges Althusserians with its manufacture, we can then examine *FM* and *RC* to see whether they contain bullshit and, if so, assay the relative amount that each contains.

### Cohen on Bullshit Philosophy

Cohen first employed the descriptor “bullshit” in order to differentiate his and his associates' methodological approach to Marxian philosophy from that of other Marxist philosophers in the late 1970s.<sup>20</sup> However, it was only in 2000, in a new introduction to *KMTH* titled “Reflections on Analytical Marxism,” that Cohen clarified what he meant by the term. In 2002, and apparently now cognizant of Harry Frankfurt's 1986 analysis of the phenomenon, Cohen further refined what he intended by the term and distinguished the variety of bullshit (philosophical) that he was interested in from Frankfurt's generic analysis.<sup>21</sup> Though the 2000 and 2002 essays are not consistent (one looks at the verbal form from the standpoint of its

18 Cohen, 2014a.

19 Cohen, 2000a, 2013a, 2013b.

20 Cohen, 2013a, p. 113.

21 Cohen, 2000a; Frankfurt, 1986.

producer, the other at the nominal form), they are complimentary; we will make use of both in our account of what Cohen means when he labels a philosophical text, argument, claim, or statement “bullshit.” This done, we can mark the distinctions relevant to the rest of this paper’s argument among bullshit Marxist philosophy, pre-analytic Marxist philosophy, and analytic Marxist philosophy.

In “Reflections on Analytical Marxism,” Cohen first takes up the rigorous conceptual analysis of the form of bullshit in which he is interested. He does so by focusing on the dialogical comportment of its producer, the bullshitter. This comportment, Cohen maintains, is “a product of an intellectually dishonest posture, one, more particularly, that includes an unwillingness to respond in an honest way to criticism.”<sup>22</sup> Unlike the dogmatist who “maintains his belief in the face of all criticism” and who may be honest about his unwillingness or inability to consider counter-arguments to his position, Cohen specifies that a bullshitter is one “who may be ready to change his position under critical assault.” However, when he does so, “he does not take precise measure of the force of that assault in order to alter his position in a controlled and scientifically indicated way. He simply shifts to another unthought-through and/or obscure position.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, a bullshitter is one who engages in a philosophical conversation and who provides reasons for her positions. However, when she is presented with possibly valid counter-arguments, she does not consider them according to agreed upon norms of philosophical reasoning and she does not take into account the scientific knowledge relevant to understanding the issue at hand.<sup>24</sup> Instead, the bullshitter shifts the line of argumentation “in order to remain undefeated.”<sup>25</sup> In short, the failings which Cohen accuses the bullshitter of are ethical and epistemic: she is interested not in generating truth through philosophical exchange but in winning the conversation. Further, she is willing to achieve this rhetorical victory by dishonest means.

In the 2002 essay “Complete Bullshit,” Cohen further refines his conception of bullshit and separates the phenomenon from the inten-

22 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxvi.

23 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxvi.

24 Based on what Cohen says about science in the 2000 Introduction and in *KMTH* as a whole, this is the most charitable reading we can give to this sentence, which seems to conflate scientific knowledge and philosophical virtues.

25 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxvi.

tional state of its producer. In so doing, he offers an analysis of bullshit which does not depend on a speaker or author’s awareness that she or he is unconcerned with truth and flouting philosophical virtues of clarity and rigor by “aiming at obscurity.”<sup>26</sup> Cohen is motivated to offer this refinement in order to better capture the variety of bullshit that he is interested in: philosophical. He also does so in order to contradistinguish this phenomenon from Harry Frankfurt’s more generic variety of bullshit where the speaker’s conscious indifference to truth is a necessary element to its production.<sup>27</sup> For Cohen, this indifference is neither a sufficient nor a necessary criterion for bullshit. Instead, he locates the “insufficient concern with truth” which is an essential feature of bullshit “with respect to features of the text itself.”<sup>28</sup>

In order to be bullshit, Cohen further specifies, a statement must meet at least one of the following sufficient criteria: it must be (a) unclarifiably unclear, (b) rubbish, or (c) irretrievably speculative. Cohen focuses on the elaboration of the first criterion because he believes it to be a feature of 20<sup>th</sup> Century French philosophical writing in general and of Althusserian philosophy in particular.<sup>29</sup> In order to apply these evaluative tools to the statements constituting *FM* and *RC*, it is therefore important to cover what he means by this term, the types of unclarifiability Cohen enumerates, as well as the test for unclarity he specifies. Because of the ascription of clarity concerns to Althusserian philosophy, we will analyze this criterion in some depth before proceeding to the two other sufficient indicators of bullshit.

To begin with the clarity benchmark, Cohen maintains that one thing which will allow us to recognize a statement as bullshit is if it manifests an “unclarifiable unclarity.” Such nonsensical utterances “cannot be rendered unobscure” and any charitable attempt at reconstructing them such that that they are sensical will leave a statement that “isn’t recognizable as a version of what was said.”<sup>30</sup> Cohen further enumerates three types of unclarifiability and suggests that there may be others. The first type of unclarifiability is at the level of an individual sentence. The second has to do with the relation of a perhaps perfectly clear individual

26 Cohen, 2013a, p. 126.

27 Cohen, 2013a, p. 115.

28 Cohen, 2013a, p. 123.

29 Cohen, 2013a, pp. 112, 126–27.

30 Cohen, 2013a, p. 122.

sentence to the other statements written or “uttered in a given context.” It is important to note that, in this case, the actual interpretive judgment of a statement is, to Cohen, irrelevant.<sup>31</sup> It may be a fact that an audience judges a statement to relate clearly to other parts of the speakers discourse when they hear it. However, these people may be incorrect and what matters is whether the statement in context is “graspable” when subjected to the test that Cohen proposes. The third type of unclarifiability has to do with the relation between two statements where one is “taken to lend credence to another” but where the way in which this is accomplished is unclear and cannot be clarified.<sup>32</sup> We will label instances of this first type of unclarifiable unclarity “sentential” while those of the second type we will label “contextual.” Those of the third type we will label “credential.” Though Cohen does not note this fact, it appears that a credential liaison is merely a specific variety of contextual unclarifiable unclarity (which always has to do with the relation between two sentences) and properly does not constitute its own type.

If the unclarifiable unclarity of a statement is not immediately evident, one test for obscurity that Cohen gives is that when one adds or subtracts “a negation sign from a text [it] makes no difference to its level of plausibility.” This is also a test for “graspability” because it cannot be said that a statement has been grasped “if its putative grasper would react no differently to its negation from how he reacts to the original statement.”<sup>33</sup> In addition to the “sufficient condition of clarity” test, another explicit lucidity criterion Cohen mentions is that a text or statement must be univocal in its possible interpretations rather than generative of multiple meanings. Though a text or statement may, by these assessments, be proven unclarifiable, Cohen does not mean to imply that a text with obscure elements or unclear relationships between statements must also be without value. Indeed, such unclarity may be productive of a “suggestiveness” which “can stimulate thought” and that “tolerates a multiplicity of interpretations.”<sup>34</sup> Labeling this type of writing “good poetry,” Cohen exempts it from the category of bullshit philosophy.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to unclarifiable unclarity, the two other sufficient

31 Cohen, 2013a, p. 123.

32 Cohen, 2013a, pp. 122–23.

33 Cohen, 2013a, p. 123.

34 Cohen, 2013a, pp. 123–24.

35 Cohen, 2013a, p. 124.

conditions of bullshit are that a statement or text be rubbish or that it be “irretrievably speculative.” Unlike the sufficient condition of clarity, which has to do with whether a statement is univocal, graspable, or makes sense in relation to the other statements it informs or draws upon, an argument or statement is rubbish if it is “grossly deficient either in logic or in sensitivity to empirical evidence.” Presumably, the statements of Oklahoma senators about snowballs and global warning fit this category, as do arguments and statements that violate the principle of identity such as Rimbaud’s famous line: “Je est un autre.” Cohen uses an example from David Miller to illustrate a comment that is neither unclear nor illogical but that is irretrievably speculative (and therefore bullshit): “Of course, everyone spends much more time thinking about sex now than people did a hundred years ago”<sup>36</sup> We can also slightly modify Cohen’s rhetorical question from his 2008 valedictory address so that it provides another example of an irretrievably speculative statement: “If I had gone to Paris, I would have sunk into a sea of bullshit and become a bullshitter myself.”<sup>37</sup> What both the Miller and the modified Cohen remark provide are examples of statements which, though clear and logically correct, are ones for which we could never acquire the empirical evidence to justify.

### **Bullshit Philosophy, Pre-analytic Marxist Philosophy, and Analytic Marxist Philosophy**

Now that we have defined “bullshit philosophy” and now that we have tests which will allow this type of philosophy to be identified when applied to *FM* and *RC*, we can move onto defining and to marking the distinctions among bullshit Marxist philosophy, pre-analytic Marxist philosophy, and analytic Marxist philosophy. Though Cohen does not give an explicit definition of what makes a philosophy Marxist, he does mention Althusser, Goldmann, Lukács, Lenin, Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Plekhanov, and E.P. Thompson as Marxist philosophers. Despite being a diverse list, the feature that all of these philosophers and their philosophies have in common is that each identifies as a Marxist thinker and each makes use of philosophical ideas originated by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Therefore, following Cohen’s practice and in the spirit of his indication

36 Cohen, 2013a, p. 123.

37 Cohen, 2013b, p. 198. The unmodified quote is: “If I had gone to Paris, would I have sunk into a sea of bullshit, and become a bullshitter myself? We shall probably never know.”

from the introduction to *KMTH* that what he has to say about Marxism can be found in section 6 of the book where he talks about Marxists, we will call “Marxist” any philosophy which labels itself Marxist and that originates or develops recognizably Marxian philosophical ideas.<sup>38</sup> Like Cohen, and despite Marx’s (possibly apocryphal) protest, we will include Marx’s own work in the category of Marxian philosophy.<sup>39</sup>

If Marxist philosophy is defined as any philosophy which labels itself Marxist and that originates or develops recognizably Marxian philosophical ideas, then how does one go about separating this great body of philosophical work into bullshit, pre-analytic, and analytic varieties? The qualitative assessments detailed above may be sufficient to allow us to distinguish bullshit from non-bullshit Marxist philosophy, but what allows us to separate pre-analytic from analytic philosophy? As with his definition of bullshit, Cohen becomes increasingly clear over time about the difference between the two types of philosophy, eventually offering both methodological and temporal considerations useful to making this distinction. Rather than give a genealogical account of this development, we will begin with the mature definition formulated by Cohen in the “Reflections on Analytical Marxism” from 2000.<sup>40</sup>

In this essay, Cohen claims broadly that a commitment to analytic Marxist philosophy “...reflects nothing less than a commitment to reason itself. It is a refusal to relax the demand for clear statement and rigorous argument.”<sup>41</sup> This commitment, he further explains, demands the adoption of methodological individualism, or the belief that social phenomena must be understood as causally produced by the actions of individuals.<sup>42</sup> As Cohen writes, “insofar as analytical Marxists are analytical in this...sense, they reject the point of view in which social formations and classes are depicted as entities obeying laws of behavior that are *not a function* of the behaviours of their constituent individuals.” The reason that Cohen gives for rejecting this perspective is that it is “scientifically undeveloped.” Elaborating on this point, Cohen compares Marxist explanation that employs a holistic methodology to thermal dynamics before the application of statistical mechanics. Just it is scientifically preferable

38 Cohen, 2000b, pp. xvii, 150–70.

39 Frederick Engels, 1882.

40 Wolff, 2014, p. 343.

41 Cohen, 2000a, p. xvii.

42 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxviii.

in thermodynamics to explain large arrangements of matter and energy by the movements of individual atoms so to, he states, is it better to explain the necessary breakdown of capitalist arrangements by the actions of its individual participants.<sup>43</sup> Thermal dynamics has moved on to the explanation of heat and temperature as causally produced by the actions of atomic individuals. Therefore, in order to be scientific, Marxism must too. If it does not, it is not scientific and it is not analytic.

To be analytic also demands the use of certain techniques and the exclusion of others.<sup>44</sup> There are three sets of techniques Cohen mentions that “require and facilitate precision of statement on the one hand and rigour of argument on the other.”<sup>45</sup> The first are the “techniques of logical and linguistic analysis developed within twentieth-century positivist and post-positivist philosophy, initially in the German-speaking but then... dominantly in the English-speaking world.” In short, one way Cohen identifies analytic philosophy is by its attempt to clarify the meanings of and relation between statements of positive fact and by its logical formalization of ordinary language statements.<sup>46</sup> The second set of techniques he references is that of classical economic theory, especially as these procedures have been mathematically formalized in the twentieth century. Finally, analytic Marxist philosophy can be identified by its use of rational choice and game theoretical techniques.<sup>47</sup>

Reading through the list of techniques employed by AMP and noting the methodological perspective that it employs, we may note a tension between analytical Marxism’s basic methodological assumption and that of many Marxists, who have historically employed holistic methods to explain social phenomena.<sup>48</sup> We might also note that the background assumptions of logical empiricism, of classical economics, and of rational choice theory contradict many of the suppositions often thought basic to Marxist analysis.<sup>49</sup> These include assumptions about the inability of formal logic to describe social phenomena, about how masses rather than

43 Cohen, 2000a, pp. xviii–xxiv.

44 Cohen, 2000a, p. xxiii.

45 Cohen, 2000a, p. xviii.

46 Beaney, 2015.

47 Cohen, 2000a, p. xviii.

48 Shiell, 1987, p. 235.

49 Roberts, 1996, p. 14.

individuals make history, about the ideological status of current scientific knowledge, and about how profit is realized.<sup>50</sup> In short, analytic Marxism demands that Marxists give up most of the critical, dialectical, and phenomenological tools and explanations historically thought to be constitutive of its theory.

With this necessary detour into the definitions of and distinctions among analytic Marxism, pre-analytic Marxism, and bullshit Marxism, we are now in a position to examine Cohen's references to Althusser and to Althusserians in order to better understand why he identified some portion of Althusser's work as bullshit. We are also in a position to compare the bullshit quotient of *FM* and *RC* and to discover whether some parts of each book are pre-analytic or perhaps even analytic.

I am not going to do it though.

Why am I not going to do it?

First, I will not do so because I think that it is a fool's errand; I am simply not interested in analyzing every statement and the relations between each statement in *FM* & *RC*. I suspect that some individual claims will be unclarifiably unclear and that the relations among statements will not be as tight as Cohen's tests' demand. I also know that Althusser in the early 1960s was wont to make speculative statements about the privilege of Marxist theory in the Marxist movement and about that movement's future.<sup>51</sup> This is so even if Althusser's rubbish quotient between 1960 and 1965 was fairly low. His philosophical writings from this time exhibit few logical howlers and they demonstrate sensitivity to empirical evidence, especially when compared to contemporaneous work in Marxist philosophy. In short, though they may not contain a lot of rubbish, one can probably identify portions of both *RC* and *FM* as bullshit according to Cohen's criteria inasmuch as both exhibit speculative content and unclarifiable unclarity.<sup>52</sup>

Second, I will not compare the bullshit quotient of *FM* and *RC* because I do not think that Althusser's occasional lack of clarity or speculative flight is a fatal flaw that renders his philosophy bullshit. To demand

50 Mamo, 1981; Mulkay, 1992, pp. 5–26; Murray, 2000; Novack, 1969, p. 42.

51 Althusser, 1990; Düttmann, 2007

52 I also suspect that, rigorously applied, one could do the same thing with Cohens work on Marxist philosophy.

this of *RC* is itself a philosophical error: it demonstrates a failure to read the book well. As Althusser makes clear, *RC* was never meant to be taken as the painstaking analysis of the truth-value of a claim or claim in Marx's philosophy (as was the intent of *KMTH*). Instead, *RC* was presented as a preliminary attempt at using Marx's theory of symptomatic reading to read *Capital* itself and in order to develop the latent philosophy within it.<sup>53</sup> Though philosophical structures and scientific concepts were brought forth and developed in the book, *RC* is primarily a synthetic and investigative work, not an analysis of each concept enumerated therein for its truth-value.

Further, the methods and the concepts Althusser and his co-authors developed in the course of the seminar (and whose contents became the collective volume *RC*) were presented as sketchy and hastily rendered; they were explicitly not meant to be taken as "contents in the systematic framework of a single discourse." As Althusser wrote on page one of the book, its essays "bear the mark of these circumstances: not only in their construction, their rhythm, their didactic or oral style, but also and above all in their discrepancies, the repetitions, hesitations and uncertain steps in their investigations."<sup>54</sup> Given this statement of intent and the recognition of the work's preliminary, lacunary and, indeed, oral character, it seems a bit much for Cohen to require of *RC* that it meet the standard of a "refusal to relax the demand for clear statement and rigorous argument," which he sometimes set for his own work.

Third, I will not comb through *FM* and *RC* to see which has more bullshit because I do not believe that, fundamentally, the concepts and methods that Althusser developed in these texts are unclarifiably unclear. Though offering a thorough defense of this claim is not one of the purposes of this paper, the history of these ideas' reception should at least be sufficient to suggest that they are not bullshit. For fifty years, Althusser's readers and critics have been critiquing, revising, and working with the concepts and methods he developed in *FM* and *RC*. Though their first formulation may have been hasty and less than explicit, today we have very lucid explanations of such concepts as structural causality, ideological interpellation, and of Althusser's hermeneutic method.<sup>55</sup> This explication has been done so well that even some of Cohen's anti-Althusserian

53 Solomon, 2012.

54 Althusser & Balibar, 1970, p. 13.

55 Boer, 2007; Montag, 2003; Resch, 1992, pp. 50–51.

allies are able to succinctly describe these concepts and their relations.<sup>56</sup> Further, theorists and activists in fields as diverse as political science, economics, and literature have judged these theories to have theoretical value and have put them to use in order to better understand and to explain the social, economic, psychological, and historical phenomena in which they are interested.

Finally, I am not going to examine every statement and the relations between each statement in *FM* and *RC* for their unclarifiable unclarity because what really interests me is *why* Cohen strenuously maintained for 30 years that Althusser's Marxism is bullshit. One way of approaching this question is to ask: "If many Marxist activists and thinkers find Althusser's interpretation of Marxist philosophy meaningful, useful, and manifestly concerned with philosophical truth, then why does Cohen never engage with Althusser's actual philosophy and instead label it BS?"<sup>57</sup> Two explanatory strategies that could be used to answer this question are the intellectual-historical and the biographical. No doubt, an account which looked at the unique circumstances of British Marxism of the '60s and '70s, at the low status of Marxist philosophy (and of political philosophy in general) at the time, and at the relative prestige held by Anglo-American analytic philosophical techniques at Oxford (as well as at the corresponding disdain for francophone methods) would go some way to explaining why Cohen's might label Althusser's Marxist philosophy bullshit. It might also explain why he could get away with such pejorative attributions and still be respected as a scholar.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, a biographical account emphasizing what it must have been like for a Jewish, red diaper baby, Montrealer to fit in at Oxford among "tough" bourgeois analytic philosophers could go a long way to explaining Cohen's hostility towards French philosophy and towards Althusserians.<sup>59</sup> However, neither the intellectual-historical nor the biographical approach gives sufficient reason for explaining the vehemence and longevity of Cohen's thirty-year negative comportment towards Althusser and Althusserians. Instead, I'd like to suggest another explanation, one that gives sufficient motivation for Cohen's sustained rejection of Althusser and Althusserians. This explanation is a philosophical one.

56 Rosen, n.d., p. 7.

57 Closest he comes is Balibar quote but he bungles its analysis

58 Lock, 1988, pp. 500–04.

59 Cohen, 2013b, pp. 193–97.

## Why Cohen labeled Althusser's Marxism Bullshit for Thirty Years

The philosophical reasons that Cohen had for his prolonged rejection of Althusser can be divided into two categories. The first is the pronounced similarity of their two projects and the consequent need for Cohen to deny these similarities in order to make his project seem more original, more tough, and less "French." The second and more profound reason is that the results of Althusser's projects from the early 1960s contradicted and undermined some of the fundamental assumptions of the theory of history that Cohen developed in the late 1970s.

The initial similarity between the projects of Cohen and Althusser has already been remarked upon in this paper. Cohen himself identified this connection and cited Althusser as its inspiration: it is the denial of the importance of Hegel's influence on Marx's mature philosophy.<sup>60</sup> Though Cohen does not develop this point in the thoroughgoing way that Althusser does in *FM*, this denial of Hegel's influence leads both to a rejection of dialectical materialism (or Marx's philosophy) as it had theretofore been historically conceived. This conviction would have consequences for each thinker's conception of nature, of history, and of individual and social experience. In terms of a philosophy of nature, for instance, both philosophers challenged the idea accepted widely among Marxists that nature develops according to dialectical laws and that its processes can only be described according to dialectical logic.<sup>61</sup> Cohen and Althusser also dismissed the idea propagated during the first years of the Cold War that dialectical materialism can serve as a guide to scientific discovery.<sup>62</sup> In addition, both argued against the prevalent understanding which had it that dialectical materialism includes a robust philosophy of history or philosophical anthropology. Correspondingly, neither Cohen nor Althusser believed that dialectical materialist philosophy includes a formula for revolution or an explanation for all and every historical change. Further, inasmuch as dialectical materialism was often thought to include or to begin from a phenomenological description of the way in which individual subjects must experience the world, both thinkers rejected this supposition. Finally, and to summarize, neither Althusser nor Cohen believed that

60 Cohen, 2000a, p. x, 2014b, p. 318; Wolff, 2014, p. 346.

61 Friedrich Engels, Dutt, & Haldane, 1940; Politzer, 1976; Stalin, 1949.

62 Althusser & Balibar, 1970, pp. 50–51; Cohen, 2014b, p. 318.



there is a specific Marxist methodology, a specific way of understanding the world and its historical and natural processes, which flows from the Hegelian dialectic even if this dialectic be specified as materialist.<sup>63</sup>

The second commonality between Althusser's and Cohen's Marxist philosophy is that both emphasized and wished to philosophically defend the scientificity of historical materialism. This defense began with the shared belief that historical materialism was underdeveloped as a science and that this underdevelopment prevented it from producing knowledge about how our socio-economic system works.<sup>64</sup> Consistent with the shared stances mentioned in the preceding paragraph, both Cohen and Althusser argued that one of the principal reasons for this underdevelopment was historical materialism's reliance for its fundamental conceptions and for its methodology on the Hegelian inspired philosophy of dialectics. Instead of relying on these widely-held assumptions, both Cohen and Althusser argued that the "basic concepts in any theoretical structure must be systematically questioned and clarified."<sup>65</sup> For Cohen, this interrogation was best done using "rigorous argument" and "precision of statement" while, for Althusser in *FM* and *RC*, it was best done by a process of reading Marx that ferreted out and then developed the scientific concepts and philosophical structure latent in his mature philosophy.<sup>66</sup>

In addition to interrogating historical materialism's basic concepts using philosophical tools and to rejecting or, in Althusser's case, to severely modifying the inherited Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism, both Marxist thinkers wished to bring the best social scientific methods and discoveries of their day to help develop historical materialism as a science. For Cohen, as we have seen, this meant an endorsement of individualistic accounts for all social phenomena, the specification of covering laws as the gold standard for scientific explanation, and the embrace of neo-classical economic and game theory.<sup>67</sup> For Althusser, it meant employing the psychoanalytic methods of Jacques Lacan, the sociological insights of Claude Levi-Strauss, the historical methods of Georges Canguilhem and Michel Foucault, and the historical materialist concepts developed in the course of Marxist practice in order to iden-

63 Althusser, 1969a; Tarrit, n.d., pp. 5, 11–12.

64 Althusser, 1969b, p. 14; Cohen, 2000a, p. xxvii.

65 Tarrit, n.d., p. 7.

66 Althusser, 1969b, p. 9; Montag, 1998, p. 71.

67 Cohen, 2000b, pp. 259–61)

tify and develop the latent philosophy hidden within *Capital* and other of Marx's mature works.<sup>68</sup>

However, and this is the central and most significant difference between the two philosophers, the one that explains why Cohen avoided engaging with Althusser's work and instead chose to label it "bullshit." It is that Althusser does not take it for granted that the dominant social science of his day (as well as assumptions about atomic level description in general) must fully and totally inform the contents, concepts, and methods of historical materialism. Rather, Althusser attempts to demonstrate that the insights from the social scientists listed above and from Marxist practice about the nature of social, psychological, and historical relations are helpful in developing the latent concepts and methods in Marx's writing. Once such concepts as overdetermination, structural causality, ideology, productive practices are identified and subsequently clarified using philosophical tools, Althusser's belief is that they can be employed as the fundamental concepts of historical materialism. This accomplished, Marxist social science can then refine these concepts in the course of its empirical investigations. If the concepts identified are the correct ones and if they are well-employed, then historical materialism will be able to advance its knowledge of history and of socio-economic relations.<sup>69</sup>

In the words of David Macey, Althusser thinks with "borrowed concepts."<sup>70</sup> However, instead of borrowing these concepts wholesale from the social scientific assumptions dominant in his theoretical "habitus" and assuming that they are true or productive of truth, Althusser borrows analytic tools from Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, Canguilhem, Spinoza and others in order to discover, name, and analyze the philosophical structures and scientific concepts which allow Marx to pursue his analyses in his mature work. The structures and scientific concepts that Althusser describes and clarifies in *FM* and *RC* are discovered in Marx's own writing and are therefore proper to his philosophy. To summarize, by a process of analysis, Althusser in *RC* and *FM* does explicitly *foundational* philosophical work on historical materialism, exploring what philosophical structures and scientific concepts constitute its theory.

Though Cohen equally borrows his concepts, he does not do so to clarify Marx's philosophy. Instead, *KMTH* is a work of *applied* philosophy.

68 Althusser & Balibar, 1970, p. 16, ; Peden, 2014, pp. 167–69.

69 Althusser & Balibar, 1970, pp. 183–87.

70 Macey, 1994.

The philosophies that Cohen borrows and applies to Marxism are neopositivism and methodological individualism. In *KMTH*, Cohen begins with a “scientific” claim from Marx’s 1859 “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* and examines it using the methodological criteria already developed within these two philosophies. To do so, he must treat Marx as the author of a fully-formed, explicitly scientific hypothesis about how and why socio-economic systems transform themselves over time.<sup>71</sup> That the claim Cohen begins with is an abbreviated claim, one which leaves out Marx’s statements about the power of ideology and about the necessity to begin an analysis of history by looking at social relations (rather than at individual agents), does not bother Cohen. This is because he (a) believes that these parts of Marx’s explanation of historical change are obscure or; (b) because they contradict the concepts and methods that Cohen knows he must use if he wants to do analytic philosophy.<sup>72</sup> To be scientific according to the philosophies of science and social science to which he subscribes, Cohen knows that he must proceed via unambiguously clear statements and arguments to the individualistic explanations of social phenomena that are the necessary condition of all genuine scientific knowing. If this way of reasoning suffices to explain how and why socio-economic systems must perish and be transformed, then Marx is vindicated in his scientific predictions. If they do not, then Marx’s scientific claim is false and his thesis about history must be rejected.<sup>73</sup>

If Althusser had ever been sufficiently motivated to respond to Cohen and to critically examine *KMTH*, he might have noted how *KMTH*’s central thesis relies on an idea of science in which a subject comes to know what its object (in this case, history) really and truly is by means of a process of abstraction and observation. He therefore would have charged *KMTH* with “empiricism” and probably even with its most historically pernicious variant: “economism,” where the true object of knowl-

71 The claim is that “in the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.” Cohen, 2000b, p. 28.

72 Cohen, 2000b, pp. xviii, 44–47, 147–50.

73 When he was unable to prove the theory of history that he attributed to Marx according to the standards of evidence and argumentation that he endorsed, it is to Cohen’s great credit that he dropped the theory and sought another justification for his Marxism. (Cohen, 2000a, p. xxiv; Wolff, 2014, p. 348.

edge is understood to be the economy: the reality that underlies, causes, and can explain all historic structures and historical transformations.<sup>74</sup> Probably, Althusser would also wonder why Cohen insists on making individual agents rather than social classes the subject of history when there are so many passages in Marx, including the one from which Cohen abstracts his historiographical hypothesis, that indicate the contrary.<sup>75</sup>

Lastly, Althusser would probably charge Cohen with not really doing philosophy and with not really taking Marx seriously as a philosopher. He would point out that, instead of trying to understand Marx’s argument, Cohen picks and chooses among Marx’s theses, looking for one that is testable according to the concepts and ideas that analytic philosophy, individualistic sociology, and neo-classical economics judge to be true. Despite their similar claims about Marx’s originality and about the importance of Marxist social science, Althusser might also point out that Cohen never takes seriously the originality of Marx’s claims about history, society, social explanation, and the possibility of social transformation. In short, and again despite his avowed claims about the importance of historical materialism, Althusser would surely indicate that Cohen fails to explore the idea that Marx founded a *new* science. With these omissions and with the substitutions of tools from what Cohen labels “analytic philosophy,” Althusser would probably come to the conclusion that what Cohen is left with in *KMTH* is a telic theory of history, one which relies fundamentally for its explanatory power on the decisions of individual agents and that is of the sort which Marx wished to avoid or, at the very least, to complicate.

If Cohen, for his part, were to respond to the diagnosis of his own theory that Althusser never made but that is implicit in *FM* and *RC*, he would have had to examine the methodological and textual assumptions of his own project. Evidently, it was easier for him to keep calling the competing and much more popular Gallic research agenda “bullshit” for thirty years and to irretrievably speculate on “Why Bullshit Flourishes in France” than to ever do this work.<sup>76</sup>

74 Althusser & Balibar, 1970, pp. 111, 138–39.

75 Resch, 1992, pp. 69–70.

76 Cohen, 2013a, pp. 126–32.

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