Having Your Cake and Eating it

An anecdote from the 1970s

Sometime early in 1973, I paid a visit to Jerry Cohen, who was then teaching philosophy at University College London. I was in my third year at Oxford, and I wanted to go on to write a doctorate on Marx’s *Capital*. Given the scarcity of Marxist philosophers in British universities (not something that has changed much in the intervening thirty years), Cohen was an obvious choice to supervise such a thesis. I remember little of our conversation – though it was amicable enough, I ended up doing my doctorate elsewhere.

One exchange did stick in my mind, however. As a native of what was then the rebel colony of Southern Rhodesia, I would not be entitled to a British state grant. I told Cohen that I intended to apply for a Commonwealth scholarship. He asked me whether I would be comfortable taking such a scholarship. The implication was that there might be something morally problematic about my taking it – whether because the Commonwealth was a means of perpetuating British imperialism, or (more likely) because, as a white Rhodesian, I might crowd out black candidates who needed the money more. Whatever the precise nature of Cohen’s reservations, I had no such qualms: I needed money to finance my doctorate, and I would cheerfully take it from whatever source was available. I made it clear that I was puzzled that he should think there was an issue there. We had stumbled into mutual incomprehension.

I tell this anecdote for two reasons. First, it fits in with the quasi-autobiographical style of Cohen’s latest book. Secondly, it dramatises the tension that is one of that
book’s main themes. Even though he was then still a pretty orthodox Marxist (the publication of Karl Marx’s *Theory of History* was still more than five years in the future), Cohen was already concerned about the role of moral judgements in guiding our actions. I believed that they had no such role – or, rather, that, insofar as they did provide us with reasons for acting, they served as one form of bourgeois ideology. In taking this position I was the more orthodox Marxist (though it was spiced up with a lavish portion of Althusserian anti-humanism and a sprinkling of Nietzsche).

Both of us have changed our views in the intervening thirty years. Cohen, as *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?* records, is now concerned intellectually less with explanatory social theory than with normative political philosophy; politically, he has travelled most (though not all) of the distance that separates Marxism from the egalitarian liberalism of John Rawls and Ronald Dworkin. Yet he has retained one of the most common Marxist assumptions, namely that we must choose between explanatory social theory and normative political philosophy, or – more broadly – between Marxism and morality. He has, in other words, rejected classical Marxism in favour of an ethical theory of justice. By contrast, having now abandoned what I now regard as the absurdly reductive view of moral discourse that I took from Marx and Althusser, I see no reason why one can not be a fairly orthodox Marxist and a realist about evaluative sentences, treating these as having, in their own way, truth-values just like sentences making factual assertions about the state of the weather or the stock market. Where once I dismissed morality in the name of Marxism, I now refuse to choose between them: I don’t see why one can not have both. I think one can have one’s cake and eat it – in this case at least.

**An exemplary journey?**

I contrast my evolution with Cohen’s not because mine is particularly interesting or important, but in order to undermine the impression of inevitability that *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?* implies about Cohen’s own trajectory from the orthodox Marxism he unreflectingly acquired thanks to his upbringing in a working-class Jewish Communist family in Quebec to the ethical socialism he now embraces. The book – based on the 1996 Gifford Lectures – weaves together personal reminiscence and philosophical argument in a manner that is initially attractive but leaves the reader (or at any rate this one) increasingly frustrated.

In the opening chapter, Cohen worries rather ineffectually about the status of beliefs acquired as a result of the particular upbringing one has had – Marxism in his case, or the analytic-synthetic distinction among those who read philosophy at Oxford. But there is one way in which we may lack reflective distance from the beliefs we