

# G. A. Cohen on Socialism\*

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G. A. Cohen's work in political philosophy has received wide attention over the past twenty years. This essay brings together disparate elements of his thought bearing on the theory and practice of socialism. Since most of Cohen's work, from the Second International Marxism of his first book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History : A Defence* (Cohen 1978) to the normative political philosophy of his very last published essay, *Why Not Socialism?* (Cohen 2009), is in some way related to the idea of socialism, this essay is split in two parts. The first part is an attempt to retrieve core socialism-related arguments by chronologically examining the development of Cohen's views, using his books as thematic signposts. The second part brings these arguments together with an eye to reconstructing his vision of socialism, as it emerges through a long intellectual journey from Marxism to normative political philosophy. The paper's central contention is that Cohen's work in political philosophy is best understood in the background of lifelong commitment to a democratic, non-market, form of socialism realizing the values of freedom, equality and community, as he understood them. I will try to substantiate this claim and, in so doing, flesh out the content of these values.

The first part begins with a brief introduction to Cohen's influential defence of historical materialism in *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (Section 1.1) and his responses to criticism of that book in his subsequent major work, *History, Labour*

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*and Freedom*<sup>1</sup> (Section 1.2). In addition to sketching substantial revisions over earlier writings, Cohen's second book signals a shift in philosophical problematic from historical materialism to the theory of exploitation and the legitimacy of private property. His commitment to certain core socialist values comes transparently into view in Cohen's third book, *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*,<sup>2</sup> simultaneously a critique of Robert Nozick and an attack against defenders of capitalist private property (Section 1.3). The paper then turns to the polemic against the liberalism of John Rawls in *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*<sup>3</sup> (Section 1.4) and the more comprehensive attack against liberal egalitarianism in *Rescuing Justice and Equality*<sup>4</sup> (Section 1.5) and *Why not Socialism?* (Section 1.6). What emerges is a picture of remarkable consistency, one of strong adherence to certain socialist and democratic values.

The second part attempts a reconstruction of Cohen's arguments for these values in light of the exposition in the first part. It develops Cohen's conception of freedom in its objective and subjective forms (Section 2.1), his understanding of justice as satisfaction of 'genuine need' (Section 2.2), his account of fraternity as 'justificatory community with others' (Section 2.3), and his enunciation of democracy for political and economic structures (Section 2.4). All four values figure prominently in his normative work and can, if properly united, suggest a rich and full-blooded account of what it means to treat people as equals.

**Remarks on Cohen's Method** One reason why Cohen's work is exacting by way of positive reconstruction is that most of his (normative) philosophical writings are engaged in polemic. This means that his arguments are often *ad hominem*, in the sense that they involve affirmation of his opponents' premises and subsequent inference, from these premises, to conclusions the said opponents cannot (costlessly) accept.

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1. Cohen 1988.  
2. Cohen 1995.  
3. Cohen 2000b.  
4. Cohen 2008.

This strategy sometimes conceals positive commitment behind polemical fog. A further hindrance to straightforward reconstruction of Cohen's positive views is that, as he himself admits, his theoretical outlook is much more "piecemeal" than that of other political philosophers, such as John Rawls. For Cohen individual judgements, rather than "principles supported by a wide range of individual judgements," retain a "certain sovereignty" in the construction of normative argument.<sup>5</sup> One must therefore keep pace with all the nuances of counterexample, rather than try to deduce conclusions from a broader moral epistemology, like that of reflective equilibrium. Finally, Cohen never developed a social theory *in tandem* with his normative commitments, or, indeed, attempted to defend one –although he seems to have been sympathetic to the Marxist sociology developed in the 1980's and 1990's by his comrade Erik Olin Wright and other Marxist social theorists. This obscures some of his sociological claims, and sometimes makes normative inferences with socio-economic content seem wanting.<sup>6</sup>

## 1 Retrieval

This section is an attempt to retrieve Cohen's positive argument on socialism from his early work on Marxism and from a series of polemics with Robert Nozick, Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls (in this chronological order).

### 1.1 Marx's Theory of History

*Karl Marx's Theory of History*<sup>7</sup> is the book that established Cohen as a leading Marxist in the Anglophone world. In this book he sets out to defend "an old-fashioned historical materialism," according to which "History is, fundamentally, the

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5. Cohen (2008, p. 4).

6. In the Introduction to the 2000 edition of *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, Cohen seems to have endorsed the meta-sociological claims of methodological individualism, according to which large-scale social phenomena are to be explained by, and only by, appeal to the motivation sets of individual agents (Cohen 2000a, p. xxiii). It is not clear whether this endorsement sits comfortably with Cohen's defence of functional explanation (for more on which see Section 1.1. below) and, if it does, whether consistency between the two renders methodological individualism vacuous. I shall try to address the latter question elsewhere.

7. Cohen 1978. All references hereafter are to the 1978 edition, unless otherwise indicated.

growth of human productive power, and forms of society rise and fall according as they enable or impede that growth.” (Cohen 1978, p. x) This is a form of “technological determinism,” variously defended by the “orthodox” Marxists of the Second International, and expounded at length by, among many others, Georgi Plekhanov (1947) and Karl Kautsky (1906). Cohen’s principal aim is to take the scientific socialism of Karl Marx and Freiderich Engels a step further, simultaneously ridding it of needless historicist baggage and endowing it with richer explanatory machinery.

Apart from the book’s lucidity and precision of argument, commentators were impressed by the originality of Cohen’s resolution of traditional conceptual difficulties in classical Marxism, and by his novel attempt to salvage a distinctive conception of the Althusserian *causalité structurale* by appeal to functional explanation.<sup>8</sup> Cohen defines the productive forces of society as any facility “capable of use by a producing agent in such a way that production occurs (partly) as a result of its use.” (Cohen 1978, p. 32)<sup>9</sup> The relations of production are “relations of effective power over persons and productive forces, not relations of legal ownership” (Cohen 1978, p. 63). This definition permits Cohen to cut through an old theoretical knot, one which bound relations of production and superstructure together as conceptually indistinguishable entities. His definition of the former as “relationships of *effective* power” thus allows for clear delimitation between (*recht-frei*) production relations and (*recht-voll*) superstructure. The latter is then defined as “those non-economic institutions whose character is explained by the nature of the economic structure” (Cohen 1978, p. 216).

With these distinctions under his belt, Cohen defends two core theses. The first, which he dubs the “development thesis” asserts that “the productive forces tend to develop throughout history” (Cohen 1978, p. 134). Cohen proposes to defend that thesis by arguing that “When knowledge provides the opportunity of expanding

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8. Cohen acknowledges a debt to the Althusserians for providing him with a stronger textual focus (Cohen 1978, p. x). For Althusser’s account of causation in Marxism, see Althusser (1965, chapter IV).

9. In order to exclude non-productive elements from this definition of the productive forces, Cohen defends a sharp distinction between the material and the social properties of society. See footnote 15, below.

productive power [men] 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.” (Cohen 1978, p. 153) It follows that, “in so far as the course of history and, more particularly, the future socialist revolution are, for Marx, inevitable, they are inevitable not despite what men may do, but because of what men, being rational, are bound, predictably, to do.” (Cohen 1978, p. 147)

The second thesis Cohen defends, which he dubs the “compatibility thesis,” asserts that “a given level of productive power is compatible only with a certain type, or certain types, of economic structures.” He elaborates as follows: “Slavery, for example, could not be the general condition of producers in a society of computer technology, if only because the degree of culture needed in labourers who can work that technology would lead them to revolt, successfully, against slave status.” (Cohen 1978, p. 158) The conjunction of the development and the compatibility theses entails what Cohen calls the “primacy thesis,” the central contention of technological determinism. Primacy consists in the idea that “the nature of the production relations of a society is explained by the level of development of its productive forces” (Cohen 1978, p. 134). He is then faced with a conundrum plaguing marxist theory since Plekhanov: that of “bicausality” (or “overdetermination” in the Althusserian system) between productive forces and relations of production, on the one hand, and relations of production and superstructure, on the other. For it is manifestly true that the relations impact on the forces, and the superstructure on the relations. How, then, could the forces *determine* the nature of the relations, and the nature of the relations *determine* the nature of the superstructure? Cohen breaks through the impasse by employing a notion of functional explanation. The idea here is, very roughly, that a phenomenon or property F is to be explained by its tendency, under certain conditions, to bring about property E. That is, even though it is F that brings E about, it is F’s tendency to do so that explains F’s presence. Hence (i) a particular set of production relations obtains, as it does, when and because it tends to develop the corresponding productive forces, and (ii) a particular superstructure

obtains, as it does, when and because it tends to foster the corresponding set of production relations. Claims (i) and (ii) are the two primacy theses that Cohen believes to be at the heart of historical materialism. This is, in effect, his solution to the Althusserian puzzle of *determination en dernière instance* (see Cohen 1978, Chapter VI, for Cohen's defence of the primacy thesis).

Cohen seems to have derived his early conception of socialism from this defence of technological determinism. He believed historical materialism entailed that

The productive achievement of capitalism is to create a surplus which permits the producers themselves to share in civilisation, nor can power now develop any further unless they *are* culturally enfranchised. The past development of the productive forces makes socialism possible, and their future development makes socialism necessary. (Cohen 1978, p. 206)

This socialism will, as a matter of (nomic?) necessity be one of "democratic self-government," which will in turn derive from the "cohesion and sophistication" imparted on to the working class by the fermentation processes of the class struggle (see Cohen 1978, pp. 214-215).

In the last, less exegetical, chapter of the book, Cohen argues that capitalism engenders a contradiction to the "detriment of human welfare." Indeed, that contradiction is "distinctive," in that capitalism is both sufficient and necessary for it. The contradiction consists in an inherent capitalist bias towards increasing production and accumulation, and not towards reducing the labour-to-leisure ratio. No society without democratically planned socialism can avoid this contradiction in practice:

A non-market society, with production integrated by a plan, democratically formed (as in *genuine* socialism)... will not generate the contradiction. For the decision makers are free, as far as systematic economic constraints are concerned, to choose between expanding output and reducing labour, when there is progress in productivity. (Cohen 1978, p. 315, emphasis provided)

"Genuine," i.e., democratic (non-market) socialism is therefore a, perhaps *the*, solution to the said contradiction, "which by definition holds between productive

forces and production relations, not between productive forces and the will and interests of particular men.” (Cohen 1978, pp. 315-316)<sup>10</sup> As we shall see in Section 2.4, Cohen believed planning to be desirable, other things equal, only if it was democratic. Moreover, his discussion of capitalism’s “distinctive contradiction,” which might in due course give way to a socialism that does not suffer it, illustrates the qualitative difference between “a *policy* choice” and the “normal functioning of an [market-based] economic system.” (Cohen 1978, p. 316)

## 1.2 Historical Materialism, Exploitation and Freedom

The conceptual and scientific innovations of *Karl Marx’s Theory of History* generated a large amount of criticism from Marxists and non-Marxists alike. The most contentious matters proved, perhaps predictably, to be the primacy thesis<sup>11</sup> and the idea of functional explanation.<sup>12</sup> Few took issue with the singularly important distinction between the material and the social, drawn by Cohen in an attempt to conceptually delimit (and fortify) the distinction between productive and non-productive elements in the production process.<sup>13</sup> In response to these criticisms, Cohen revises several key elements of his original defence of historical materialism. He sets out by denying a common Marxist view according to which historical materialism presupposes Marxist anthropology, the Marxist account of human nature. Indeed, he criticises that account for failing to make sense of the human need for self-definition or self-identification (Cohen 1988, pp. 137-144) but claims that the

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10. In a later passage, Cohen commends planning for the (efficiency) reason that it prevents waste in resources. See Cohen (1978, p. 337).

11. See Levine and Wright (1980, pp. 60-68) and Joshua Cohen (1982, pp. 262-273).

12. See the exchange between Cohen (1980, 1982) and Jon Elster (1980, 1982).

13. Charles Mills (1989) has taken up in this question in some depth. I agree with Mills that Cohen’s distinction between the material and the social is exegetically unsustainable. But I also doubt it is conceptually sustainable. For Cohen distinguishes between “social relations” and “work relations.” The latter constitute “relations binding producers engaged in material production, conceived in abstraction from the rights and powers they enjoy vis-à-vis one another, and others.” (Cohen 1978, p. 111) But how can a set of material *relations* between people (which presumably includes the power each has to, say, abstain from joint production) be thus defined? Much hinges on the answer to this question. If it cannot be comprehensively answered, then the conceptual edifice of social *form*, said to “imprison” the material *content* of society, comes crushing down, taking with it the idea of socialism as the “conquest of form by matter” (Cohen 1978, p. 129). Althusser takes issue with the distinction between form and content -and the “guilty Hegelianism” he associates with it- in Althusser (2005). I am grateful to John Filling for impressing on me the significance of the material/social distinction for Cohen’s conceptual scheme, and for numerous discussions on this (social!) matter.

falsehood of Marxist anthropology does not vitiate commitment to historical materialism. For it is Marxist anthropology that downplays the need for self-identification, and historical materialism is –as the Althusserians were wont to insist- consistent with rejection of Marxist anthropology. Even so, it still remains to be shown that the human need for self-identification – variously embodied in the persistence of religious and nationalistic feeling - does not constitute an independent objection to historical materialism. In order to defend materialism, Cohen reformulates his second primacy thesis, the one assigning explanatory primacy to relations over superstructure.

In his revision of historical materialism Cohen distinguishes between its *inclusive* variant, according to which superstructural phenomena are largely explained by material or economic conditions, and its *restricted* variant, according to which superstructural phenomena are not largely explained by material or economic conditions, but are also not “ultimately responsible” for material progress (Cohen 1988, p. 160). Restricted historical materialism immunises the material and economic from superstructural determination, while allowing a large degree of undetermined (Althusserian “relative”) autonomy for the latter. Cohen defends the restricted version because he believes it has greater explanatory capacity, but also because it seems to accord better with the Marxist vision of socialist society. For inclusive historical materialism implies that the “free and creative spiritual production” of socialism is “pervasively determined” by the material and the economic. Indeed, once an “independent human interest in creativity has been acknowledged, there [is] no reason to expect the activity which it generates” to be thus dominated. (Cohen 1988, p. 171)

*History, Labour, and Freedom* is of importance in Cohen’s *oeuvre* both because of its revisionary force and because of its shift in philosophical outlook. For it signals a move from the theory of history to the morality of exploitation and the legitimacy of private property. Historical materialism, as conceived by Cohen, has an intimate connection with exploitation. It sees history as “a protracted process of liberation – from the scarcity imposed on humanity by nature, and from the oppression imposed by some people on others.” (Cohen 1988, p. vii) Humanity will eventually shake off

both the shackles of natural scarcity and of exploitation of man by man. But in order to do so it has to pass through “the capitalist vale of tears” (Cohen 2008, p. 176) with its attendant domination and exploitation.

In the Marxist canon exploitation assumes different forms under different economic structures, but it necessarily involves a transfer of (use-value) surplus from one class to another.<sup>14</sup> With the prodigious growth in this surplus comes a gradual diminution in “socially necessary” forms of exploitation, until exploitation is fully abolished under communist material superabundance.<sup>15</sup> Cohen thus sets out to criticise the traditional Marxist conception of exploitation and to explore its links with the (putative) Marxist commitment to equality.<sup>16</sup> In “The Labour Theory of Value and the Concept of Exploitation” he argues that the traditionally assumed connection between the labour theory of value and the notion of exploitation rests on a fundamental equivocation regarding the object of labour’s creation. Cohen’s argument begins by attributing to orthodox Marxists the “traditional view” that “labour and labour alone creates *value*.” He proceeds to claim that the labour theory of value entails the falsehood of that claim, since that theory only refers to *counterfactual* (necessary), rather than actual, labour time in ascertaining value. He infers that the proponents of the traditional view misconstrue the labour theory, and argues that they confuse the notion that “labour alone creates value” with the distinct idea that “labour alone creates what *has* value.” Such a “small difference of phrasing covers an enormous difference of conception.” (Cohen 1988, p. 238) It is the latter, and not the former, idea that has significance for the theory of exploitation. It follows that the relationship between the labour theory of value and the theory of exploitation

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14. For Cohen classes become possible when, and only when, society becomes capable of reproducing a surplus over and above what is necessary for basic subsistence. And once class division, along these lines, becomes possible, it also becomes necessary, in the sense that it becomes causally indispensable to the achievement of growth in productive power, the means to *en masse* human self-emancipation (see Cohen 1978, pp. 207-215).

15. For the idea of ‘socially necessary’ exploitation, which follows more or less readily from Cohen’s account of historical materialism, see John Roemer (1995).

16. Cohen maintained that Marxists are committed to moral condemnation of capitalism as unjust because that is the only way (i) to make sense of central claims within Marxian and Marxist political economy (such as the “theft” of labour time under “fair” capitalist exchange), (ii) to make sense of the conviction and passion Marxists invest in questions of equality, (iii) to explain Marxist participation in political struggles when each can harmlessly stay at home (since the contribution of each makes little, if any, difference to the outcome of these struggles). See Cohen (1983, pp. 442-445) and Cohen (1995, pp. 139, 195).

is one of “mutual indifference.” Cohen concludes that:

Instead of desperately shifting about for some or other way of defending the labour theory, Marxists and quasi-marxists should address themselves to the crucial question, which is whether or not private ownership of capital is morally legitimate. (Cohen 1988, p. 238)

This he proceeds to do for the rest of the book and – it is no exaggeration to say - for the rest of his academic career.

At about this time Cohen’s commitment to certain socialist values, values which will later figure ever more prominently in his understanding of the just society, begin to surface more transparently. The first value to make such appearance is that of freedom, which he investigates in connection with defences of capitalist economic structures. Cohen’s argumentative strategy here is typically *ad hominem* (in the sense set out in the Introduction above). He thus accedes to the *negative* definition of freedom (propounded by Isaiah Berlin and others) as absence of liability to interference, and studies its connection with capitalist relations of production. That definition appeals to the objective structure of production relations, such that (un)freedom does not depend on subjective conditions idiosyncratic to individuals. It follows from Cohen’s negative and “objectivist” definition that, if A is forced to X, then A is *pro tanto* free to X. (see Cohen 1988, pp. 241-244) Indeed, forcing presupposes freedom. For “how can you be forced to do something you are not free to do?” Thus Cohen grants the right-wing idea that workers are free to take certain jobs under capitalism, including hazardous ones, such as working as cleaners in a nuclear reactor.<sup>17</sup> But, unlike the right-wingers, he denies that such freedom is inconsistent with forcing, where A’s being forced to X means having to choose to X when there exists no acceptable or reasonable alternative to X-ing. (Cohen 1988, p. 245)<sup>18</sup> The implication of these taxonomies for the theory of proletarian (un)freedom is studied

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17. And quotes Marx approvingly: “the period of time for which [the labourer] is free to sell his labour power is the period of time for which he is forced to sell it.” (Marx (1976, p. 415), quoted in Cohen 1988, p. 244.)

18. If, as Cohen asserts elsewhere, being forced to X is a form of unfreedom, it follows that some forms of “unfreedom require freedom.” See Cohen (1998).

presently.

Cohen denies that forcing A to X implies A's unfreedom to X. And he also denies that -under normal capitalist conditions, where A is an individual worker, and X the verb form of some occupation- A is unfree to not-X. Indeed, workers under capitalism are "individually free," in the sense that each can make his way into the petty bourgeoisie and escape his proletarian predicament without (liability to) interference from others. But, Cohen argues, it does not follow, and it is false, that workers are *collectively* free. If all the workers were to attempt self-emancipation together, they would find themselves incapable of jointly squeezing through the petty bourgeois loophole (Cohen 1988, pp. 261-265):<sup>19</sup>

It is part of the genius of capitalist exploitation that, by contrast with exploitation which proceeds by "extra-economic compulsion", it does not require the unfreedom of specified individuals. There is an ideologically valuable anonymity on *both* sides of the relationship of exploitation. (Cohen 1988, p. 265)

This is the structure of proletarian unfreedom: because capitalism generates collective unfreedom, and because such collective unfreedom can never be overcome under capitalism (since the growth rates required to raise everyone to bourgeois standards of living can never be achieved), socialism promises "a better liberation: not just from the working class, but from class society." (Cohen 1988, p. 265)

The discussion on freedom naturally brings Cohen to the institution of private property under capitalism. On any plausible definition of freedom, he argues, private property restricts freedom: it is simply a distribution of freedom and unfreedom.<sup>20</sup> It follows that one "cannot both deny that justice restricts freedom and claim that private property is just." (Cohen 1988, p. 252) For private property restricts freedom, and if it is just – as proponents of capitalism claim – then justice restricts freedom.

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19. Cohen here enlists his parable of the cave and key: there are ten people in the cave and only one key. Once someone exits the door is locked forever. The people in the room are individually free to exit, i.e., free in *sensu diviso*, but not collectively free, in *sensu composito*, to do so.

20. See Cohen 1988, pp. 292-299 and Cohen 1998, p. 13.

This is one reason why those proponents eschew talk about freedom and instead choose to talk about liberty: the latter is much more amenable to moralised, rights-based, definition than the former, in a way that does not lock them into Cohen's apt disjunction. This is precisely the strategy pursued by right-wing libertarians, such as Robert Nozick. Having defended historical materialism as best he could – and having shed much of the Second International optimism of *Karl Marx's Theory of History* - Cohen turns his sights towards normative political philosophy, where major ideological battles take place at the level of theory.

### **1.3 The Polemic Against Private Property and the Defence of Socialism**

In his third book<sup>21</sup> Cohen explicitly outlines the reasons that originally impelled him towards political philosophy. In doing so he distinguishes between two important challenges which we may call the *agency* and the *scarcity* problems. Both shake the theoretical self-confidence of classical Marxists, who “believed that economic equality was historically inevitable [and thus] did not spend much time thinking about *why* equality was morally right, about exactly what made it morally binding.” (Cohen 1995, p. 6)

The agency problem arises due to the fragmentation of the working class, which deprives history of the agent with the will and capacity to carry revolution forward in the interest of freedom and equality. According to Cohen, the optimism of classical Marxists flowed from the joint ascription of certain properties to one class, which would encompass the majority of people in society, produce the wealth of society, represent the exploited people in society, and comprise the needy people in society. The concomitance of these four properties in the working class was deemed both necessary and sufficient condition for socialist revolution. These properties, says Cohen, have now come apart. It follows that there is “no group with both (because of its exploitation, and its neediness) a compelling interest in, and (because of its produc-

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21. Cohen 1995.

tiveness and its numbers) a ready capacity to achieve, a socialist transformation.” (Cohen 1995, p. 8) Indeed, he claims that “the old (partly real, partly imagined) agency of socialist transformation is gone and there is not, and never will be, another one like it.” (Cohen 2000b, p. 112). This generates a need for moral advocacy, which is directly proportional to the degree of diffusion of the said properties across distinct social agents.

Cohen’s second challenge to classical Marxist self-confidence, the scarcity problem, consists in the un-attainability of the abundance envisioned by Marx in his writings on communism, particularly *The German Ideology* and *Theories of Surplus Value*. Such levels of superabundance are unattainable, at least in the short-to-medium term. This correspondingly amplifies the “need to argue for the desirability of an egalitarian socialist society” (Cohen 1995, p. 7), a need which Cohen strives to satisfy in his post-1980’s work.

Cohen’s immediate purpose in *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* is to refute the libertarianism of Robert Nozick, for at least two reasons. First, Cohen believed Nozick’s theory to possess “intellectual muscle” and widespread ideological appeal. It was therefore worth taking seriously. Second, Cohen maintained that many Marxists affirm principles - such as that of self-ownership - typically reserved for use by the pro-capitalist right, to disastrous consequences for socialist theory and practice. He thus set out to tackle an influential libertarian argument elicited by Nozick’s famous “Wilt Chamberlain” example. Nozick enlists this example to show that (egalitarian) patterning of distribution is inconsistent with individual freedom. It follows that some form of unregulated capitalism promotes, while socialism impedes or stifles, individual freedom.

Nozick invents the example of a famous basketball player who, starting from an equal distribution of wealth in society, accumulates wealth through the voluntary choices of his adoring fans, in a way that upsets the original egalitarian pattern. In elaboration of this argument, Cohen attributes to Nozick the claim that “whatever arises from a just situation as a result of fully voluntary transactions on the part of

all transacting agents in itself just.” (Cohen 1995, p. 21) Nozick infers, says Cohen, that the socialist commitment to equality is unjust. Cohen rejects both the putative premise and the inference. He rejects the premise (Cohen 1995, pp. 42-44) because he believes brute luck of all sorts can upset the *outcomes* of perfectly just transactions in an unjust way. But he also rejects the inference by arguing that in a socialist society people would either behave out of direct concern for equality *per se* (in which case they would not go to Chamberlain’s game, or only accede to a much lower ticket, or Chamberlain himself would give the money back), or they would voluntarily form “pattern maintenance associations” which would pattern outcomes without impinging on anyone’s freedom. Indeed, Cohen argues that this is what “democratically authorised taxation” effectively does (Cohen 1995, p. 27).

Cohen then picks up on another libertarian argument, according to which the socialist state would have to “forbid capitalist acts between consenting adults,” which is, according to Nozick, unacceptable. Cohen argues, against Nozick, that a socialist society which “prizes equality” would not have to forbid such acts as long as the number of people negatively disposed towards equality remained relatively low (Cohen 1995, pp. 29-30). And he also rejects Nozick’s major premise that restrictions on the freedom of contract necessarily reduce freedom. For rendering A unfree to enslave himself to B may – under normal conditions would - increase or improve the freedom(s) available to A (Cohen 1995, pp.54-55).

Having called Nozick’s bluff on the theory of freedom, Cohen turns his attention to property rights, and their intricate relationship with the principle of self-ownership. Libertarians of all stripes, left and right, are wont to assert that rights flow from a stringent property right of the individual to his own person and powers. But such a right has no substance at all until we are told what rights people have to the external world, rights which in turn circumscribe the sphere of legitimate exercise of self-ownership.<sup>22</sup> Cohen exploits this conceptual gap in the content of rights (to person

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22. It is here that libertarianism bifurcates into its left- and right- variants, the former embracing equality of (access to) external resources, and the latter placing little or no restrictions on the extent of permissible inequality.

and world) to develop an *ad hominem* argument against Nozick. In *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, Nozick claims that virtually any form of worldly-resource appropriation by A is just, as long as it does not harm B.<sup>23</sup> Cohen points out that harm to others is a very loose baseline of comparison, as it permits, *inter alia*, ruthlessly exploitative behaviour by A vis-à-vis B (for example, it permits A to enclose land previously held in common by both and get B to work for him at a measly – but welfare-improving - wage) (Cohen 1995, pp. 67-91). The reason why such outcomes are deemed permissible is that Nozick illicitly privileges non-harm as the relevant baseline of comparison between appropriation and non-appropriation. If we were, instead, to claim – as many socialists do - that the land cannot legitimately be appropriated *ad libitum* because it is owned by all as a matter of *moral right* (like the putative right of self-ownership), then no appropriation of the sort would be permitted. Thus Cohen’s argument gives rise to a dilemma: right-libertarians, he states,

could not *both* reject a jointly owned (and thoroughly egalitarian) world on the ground that it drains self-ownership of its substance *and* defend an unmodified capitalist economy, in which the self-ownership of many people is no less insubstantial. (Cohen 1995, p. 14)

Naturally the form of joint ownership advocated by Cohen in the context of this polemic is very stringent, too stringent to give us guidance as to the form of joint ownership socialists (should) actually affirm. But it does succeed in showing that either Nozickian self-ownership is consistent with socialist equality, or it is inconsistent with full-fledged *laissez-faire* capitalism.

As part of the polemic against Nozick, Cohen makes two further important contributions to a philosophical understanding of the concepts of freedom and exploitation. On the one hand, he exposes a familiar move in liberal and libertarian circles,

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For recent discussion of left-libertarianism, see Otsuka (2005, chapter 1).

23. See Nozick 1974, pp. 174-182.

according to which lack of money is not lack of freedom, but rather lack of *means* (to use freedom already actualised). For, Cohen says, to lack money is to be liable to interference while trying to board a train without a ticket, while “the assimilation of money to mental and bodily resources [i.e. means – NV] is a piece of unthinking fetishism, in the good old marxist sense that it misrepresents *social relations of constraint* as things that people lack.” (Cohen 1995, pp. 58-59)<sup>24</sup>

On the exploitation front, Cohen mounts a defence of the Marxian unequal-exchange-of-labour definition against objections promulgated by John Roemer. Roemer has argued at length that this definition of exploitation does not hold water. He favours instead one based on property relations. Indeed, Roemer argues that Marxists would do well to abandon their concern with exploitation (traditionally conceived), since that idea presents a moral distraction from things that matter, such as the injustice of property-rights structures and the patterns of domination pervasive in advanced capitalism.<sup>25</sup> Cohen attacks Roemer for failing to distinguish between what the former calls *normative* and *causal fundamentality*. In the theory of exploitation, the normatively fundamental feature is always “the unjust transfer of product.” The inequality of assets is therefore merely causally fundamental, since causally responsible for generating an “unjust extraction.” (Cohen 1995, p. 199) Both features have relevance for justice, but what makes exploitation wrong, its wrong-making feature, is the type of *transfer* on which exploitation supervenes. Cohen’s view is that all force-induced unreciprocated flows, such as those taking place in the context of a labour market, are exploitative and therefore unjust.<sup>26</sup> Capitalism, with its differential ownership of means of production, enables and facilitates such flows. Capitalist property relations are therefore, among other things, unjust.

A first step towards eradicating the nasty and particularly pervasive form of in-

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24. This is a *précis* of Cohen’s (1998) argument, which discusses the conceptual intricacies between money and freedom in much greater depth.

25. See Roemer 1995, pp. 65-96.

26. For Cohen exploitation is a subset of injustice, or more precisely, of unfairness. I shall briefly return to this in Section 2.2.

justice that is exploitation is to move towards socialism. But what form ought that socialism to take? Cohen offers an early summary of his more mature views in the concluding essay to *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*. That essay, poignantly entitled “The Future of a Disillusion,” is his take on the socialist project after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In it he characterises the post-1989 mood among socialist intellectuals as one of melancholia, i.e., of mourning and self-reproach, since “what is lost is a long-since denied. . . love.” (Cohen 1995, p. 254) Thus Cohen claims that “those of us on the left who were stern critics of the Soviet Union before it collapsed needed it to be there to receive our blows. The Soviet Union needed to be there so that, with one eye on it, we could construct a better one. It created a non-capitalist mental space in which to think about socialism.” (Cohen 1995, p. 250) This *psychological* predicament of many intellectuals in the 1990’s engenders a variety of responses, from complete abandonment of the socialist ideal, to “adaptive preference formation,” the “irrational process in which a person comes to prefer A to B just because A is available and B is not.” (Cohen 1995, p. 253)

In “The Future of a Disillusion” Cohen explicitly avows four values as central to his conception of socialism: freedom, equality, democracy and community. He thinks socialists favour: “Instead of the class exploitation of capitalism, economic equality; instead of the illusory democracy of class-based bourgeois politics, a real and complete democracy; instead of the alienation from one another of economic agents driven by greed and fear, and economy characterised by willing mutual service.” (Cohen 1995, p. 253) It is on the basis of these values that he proceeds to criticise those on the left who, in the face of Soviet collapse, engage in adaptive preference formation. Cohen does not deny that advocates of market socialism, for example, are genuinely committed to the said socialist values. And he also suggests that “as far as immediate political programmes are concerned, market socialism is probably a good idea.” (Cohen 1995, p. 257) But market socialists come to think “the grass is greener on this side of the fence.” For the socialism they advocate is “unlike traditionally conceived socialism” in that it belittles, *inter alia*, “the traditional

socialist emphasis on economic equality.” Cohen criticises David Miller for engaging in adaptive preference formation when the latter argues that “market socialism tends to reward desert, and therefore is, substantially, distributively just.” (Cohen 1995, p. 257) Cohen denies that market socialism tends to reward desert, denies that desert tracks justice, and thus denies that market socialism is just. He thus proposes to return to the communist principles propounded by Marx in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. There Marx enunciates an ideal of society in which the market has no sway over the lives of individuals, and where reward is no longer a function of *contribution* to community.

In the course of this argument one finds, in embryonic form, a recurring motif in Cohen’s political philosophy, central to his later critique of Rawls, which opposes market society because of the unjust and unfraternal relations the latter consistently generates.<sup>27</sup> *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* is, in part, a defence of decommodified society, brought to bear through a polemic against defenders of capitalism. From here on, the object of Cohen’s normative critique is not capitalism *simpliciter*, but in addition (i) forms of socialism and social democracy that give pride of place to generalised commodity production, and (ii) types of motivation fostered by such production. Thus Cohen’s attention gradually fixes its focus onto the dominant current in contemporary political philosophy, Rawls’ theory of justice.

#### 1.4 One the Site of Distributive Justice

Cohen’s fourth major work, a series of lectures delivered as the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh, is in large part an outgrowth of Cohen’s early critique of the market. (Cohen 2000b) The book seeks to criticise Rawls and his followers for condoning inequality when that issues outside society’s “basic” institutional structure. Cohen kicks off the discussion from his own diagnosis of classical Marxism –both in respect

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27. The term “market” is multiply ambiguous. Cohen manifestly means by it, not an innocuous forum for exchange of goods and services, but what Marxists call “generalised commodity production,” i.e., a system of production in which use values, including labour power, are bought and sold in the pursuit of profit. Carens’ egalitarian system (for more on which see Section 1.5, below) is market-based in the first sense alone.

of the fragmentation of revolutionary agency (the agency problem) and the lack of superabundance (the scarcity problem). He criticises what he dubs the “obstetric motif,” the classical Marxist idea (inspired, according to Cohen, by Hegelian historicism), that because “the solution is the consummation of the full development of the problem” all society – and its communist members - can do is “lessen the birth pangs” of a coming egalitarian world order. (Cohen 2000b, p. 54). Repeating part of the diagnosis proffered in *Self-Ownership Freedom and Equality*, Cohen claims that the “hard carapace surrounding marxist values” has irreparably decayed, and restates his belief that there no longer exists a unified group with the “will and capacity to revolution.” The conjunction of these claims, he says, impels Marxists to political philosophy. The need to philosophise is “related to a political need to be clear as never before about values and principles for the sake of socialist advocacy.” (Cohen 2000b, p. 109)

In the face of the scarcity and agency problems, and with Rawls in his sights, Cohen takes up two elements of an important distinction issuing directly from the liberal egalitarian canon: the first has to do with the injustice of capitalist institutional *structures* and distribution and the second with individual behaviour *within* these structures. Cohen came to think, in his critique of market socialism,<sup>28</sup> that structure-independent egoistic *behaviour* is an equally significant impediment to the realisation of democratic (i.e. non-market) socialism. It is on the latter impediment that he focuses in *If you're an Egalitarian, How Come you're so Rich?*

Cohen develops his critique of Rawlsian liberalism by appropriating the feminist slogan “the personal is political.” That critique is framed in terms of a dilemma for Rawls:

he must either admit application of the principles of justice to (legally optional) social practices, and, indeed, to patterns of personal choice that not legally prescribed... or, if he restricts his concern to the coercive struc-

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28. See, apart from “The Future of a Disillusion” essay, Cohen 1994.

ture only, then he saddles himself with a purely arbitrary delineation of his subject matter. (Cohen 2000b, p. 139)

And, Cohen claims, if Rawls does opt for the first horn of the dilemma, then his theory will align itself with Cohen's own putative view that "social justice requires a social ethos which inspires uncoerced equality-supporting choice."<sup>29</sup> One can here discern two argumentative strands surfacing in Cohen's critique of Rawls: the first relates to the wrong-making features of market behaviour *as such*, whereas the second relates to the *content* of such behaviour. For Cohen objects both to the practice of the talented self-maximisers (i.e., those who, because of superior talent, reap great rewards for themselves in the marketplace) and to the motivating reasons for such practice (which is to enrich oneself at the expense of another). The second line of criticism gains prominence in Cohen's last big book, *Rescuing Justice and Equality. If you're an Egalitarian, How Come you're so Rich?* focuses on the behaviour of the talented self-maximisers as such. Accordingly, Cohen argues that

if we care about social justice, we have to look at four things: the coercive structure, other structures, the social ethos, and the choices of individuals; and judgement on the last of these must be informed by awareness of the power of the others. (Cohen 2000b, p. 143)<sup>30</sup>

Cohen's argument is again *ad hominem*. It thus tends to exaggerate, for polemical reasons, the demandingness of an *ethos* of justice (aimed at defeating Rawlsian indifference to unjust behaviour), without rejecting the Rawlsian account of what justice *demand*s, which Cohen also thought to be false (see Section 1.5).

The last essay of the book distinguishes between three salient possibilities that arise once the personal is admitted under the political, i.e., under the purview of justice. All three are candidate responses to the question that forms the book's

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29. Cohen 2000b, p. 131. Cohen defends "voluntary uncoerced equality" as an alternative both to over-optimism about material possibility and to Evgeny Pashukanis' coercive anti-individualism in Cohen 1995, pp. 127-135.

30. In sapient commentary on Cohen, David Estlund links Cohen's critique of Rawls with Marx's early critique of Otto Bauer: "only when man has recognized and organized his 'own powers' as *social* powers, and, consequently, no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of *political* power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished." See Estlund 1998 for discussion.

title. They are whether the unjustly-behaved talented self-maximisers who profess a commitment to equality, but do not give a substantial proportion of their income to the worse-off, display (i) hypocrisy, or (ii) *akrasia*, or (iii) lack of - what we may call - integrity. Hypocrisy presupposes insincerity, and *akrasia* presupposes inability to do what one knows he ought to do. Neither of these possibilities exercise Cohen. What he is, rather, interested in is (iii), that is, whether a non-weak-willed person may be sincerely committed to certain ideals and justifiably not strive to make them true. Cohen advances a number of possible answers to this challenge, including the assurance problem (where both A and B want to contribute X to some cause, but A will only contribute if B contributes as well) and draws a distinction between unjust behaviour and blameworthy behaviour. He argues that the former does not entail the latter. This correspondingly loosens the moralistic rigour of the *ethos* he advocates.

In line with the general tenor of the core argument in *If you're an Egalitarian, How Come you're so Rich?*, Cohen's sparse remarks on socialist practice are quite pessimistic. On numerous occasions he asserts, for instance, that "a society whose basic structure is such that every able-bodied person earns roughly the same income" is "not at present feasible."<sup>31</sup>

## 1.5 Rescuing Justice, in Content and in Concept

Before launching into a summary of Cohen's last major work, I must briefly outline his understanding of the content of distributive justice. That understanding stems principally from his critique of the market, and is directly opposed to Ronald Dworkin's idea that markets are somehow constitutive of justice. Cohen entered the "equality of what?" debate somewhat reluctantly, with an influential 1989 essay. In this essay he coins the term "currency" of justice,<sup>32</sup> the *distribuendum* in which

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31. Cohen 2000b, p. 167. As we shall see, Cohen means here "a society with roughly the same income" which also satisfies the ideals of freedom, community and democracy.

32. Cohen 1989.

justice is properly “cashed out.” Cohen defines exploitation as the “unfair taking of advantage” and characterises the “primary egalitarian impulse” as the drive to extinguish the influence of exploitation and brute luck from distribution. (Cohen 1989, p. 908)

“On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice” seeks to do two things, both intimately connected to the socialist project: on the one hand Cohen seeks to realign Dworkin’s “cut” between ambition sensitivity and endowment insensitivity in a way that severs Dworkin’s putative link between justice and the market. On the other hand, Cohen seeks to integrate traditional socialist concerns, such as labour burden and economic power into the proper *equalisandum* of justice. Pursuit of the first prong of the strategy inaugurates what has come to be called the “expensive taste” debate. That is principally about whether tastes or preferences merit satisfaction or compensation at the bar of justice. Although Cohen agrees with Dworkin that justice is inconsistent with equality of welfare (when, for example, people differ in their choices, or in predicaments for which they can reasonably be held responsible), he also asserts that people ought to be compensated for involuntary or uncultivated expensive tastes. Some tastes are not chosen and therefore merit satisfaction or ground claims for compensation. Thus Cohen maintains that “there is between Dworkin's account of egalitarian justice and mine the difference that my account mandates less market pricing than his does.” (Cohen 1989, p. 923)

In a later essay,<sup>33</sup> Cohen returns to this question, making even more explicit the principal reason the expensive taste debate exercises him: it is of importance “because it bears deeply on the justice of the market process.” (Cohen 2004, p. 4) The decommodification motif returns, and Cohen explicitly invokes, in this connection, the Marxian principle of distribution: “Egalitarians like me see the market as, at best, a mere brute luck machine... the distributive norm I favour takes part of its inspiration from the socialist slogan ‘To each according to their needs, according

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33. Cohen 2004.

that is, to what they need for fulfilment in life’.” (Cohen 2004, p. 17) Now, Dworkin holds that justice is equality-constrained-by-the-costs-individual-choices-impose-on-others. He infers that the market is the (one) institution that appropriately reflects such constraints. Cohen questions the premise, by arguing that sometimes justice requires that A give to B even if B’s choices reflect a taste for things that happen to be expensive (i.e., when B is in genuine, i.e., uncultivated, need). His condemnation of the market follows readily from this view.<sup>34</sup>

The second prong of Cohen’s socialist strategy involves incorporating neglected dimensions of human well-being into the proper metric of equality. Cohen believes things like labour burden to merit incorporation into that metric: there can be claims for compensation not reducible to resources, goods, or capabilities. Cohen’s more inclusive metric is therefore much more sensitive to inequality than Dworkin (who limits his attention to resources) and Rawls (who limits his attention to primary goods).

I turn now to Cohen’s last major book, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*. This was the culmination of twenty years’ work in normative political philosophy. The book is split in two parts, the first of which offers substantive moral argument, while the second is primarily meta-ethical. I shall not be concerned with Cohen’s meta-ethical critique of (Rawls’?) constructivism here.<sup>35</sup> Most commentators on the substantive part of *Rescuing Justice and Equality* see Cohen’s project as principally a “challenge to contemporary complacency about inequality.”<sup>36</sup> Yet, although there certainly exists a critique of such complacency in Cohen, I do not think that is the book’s major thrust. Rather, in light of the polemical links established in *Rescuing Justice and Equality* and laid bare in Cohen’s essay *Why not Socialism?*, it is perhaps more plausible to maintain that he is actually engaged in a polemic against market

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34. I agree with Cohen’s condemnation, but I also believe Dworkin’s inference to be flawed: even if justice tracks opportunity costs to others, it does not follow that markets can do this tracking better than other structures, or, indeed that they can do it in *any* satisfactory way. I criticise this inference in an essay entitled “Egalitarianism Against the Market,” which is available from me upon request.

35. But see, for important recent discussion, Feltham (2009) as well as Kurtulmus (2009).

36. This is part of the endorsement of the book by Joshua Cohen, which captures the general tenor of the authors commenting on Cohen’s substantive ethical argument in the Feltham volume.

structures (and, *a fortiori*, against capitalism).<sup>37</sup> This assertion will become clearer, I hope, after a more elaborate reconstruction of Cohen's normative commitments in Part 2.

"The Incentives Argument," Cohen's very first essay in *Rescuing Justice and Equality* is important because it brings together disparate elements of his critique of Rawls and develops them along a number of dimensions.<sup>38</sup> Cohen is again after the "dualism" that pervades Rawls' liberalism, represented by the "division of moral labour" between principles of justice that apply to structure and principles of justice that apply to individuals. But whereas *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* was concerned with extending the purview of justice from social structures to personal behaviour, the substantive-ethical part of *Rescuing Justice and Equality* is concerned with a particular form of such behaviour, namely that of the talented demanding high rewards for themselves in the context of market society. Cohen is much more explicit here, than in *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, as to the wrong-making features of such behaviour. On the one hand, giving higher salaries or profits to the talented is "giving to those who have" (Cohen 2008, p. 86). It is therefore unjust.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, providing such incentives to induce improvements in aggregate well-being - or, indeed, improvements in the well-being of the worst-off - contravenes the value of fraternity, or community, which Cohen discusses at length. I shall begin with Cohen's discussion of community, and then move on to his discussion of justice.

In spelling out his conception of community, Cohen develops an analogy between a kidnapper and the "talented egoists" of market societies. He asks us to imagine a

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37. See, for example, Cohen's opening remarks in the essay on incentives, where he declares that his argument "applies not only to capitalist economies but also to economies without private ownership of capital, such as certain forms of market socialism." (Cohen 2008, p. 34)

38. That chapter is a reproduction of Cohen's 1991 Tanner Lectures, entitled "Incentives, Inequality and Community." I shall refer to the *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, rather than the Tanner, version because the former includes some (minor) 2008 revisions.

39. The argument of *Rescuing Justice and Equality* asserts a form of the difference principle: it is intended as an *ad hominem* critique of Rawls. Cohen's own account of justice is, as we have seen, inconsistent with the difference principle (even in its "strict" egalitarian interpretations). It therefore condemns rewards to the talented much more readily than does Rawls'. For discussion of the "lax" and "strict" interpretations of the difference principle, see the discussion that follows.

kidnapper directly addressing an ultimatum to the kidnapped child's parents:

Children should be with their parents.

Unless you pay me, I shall not return your child.

So you should pay me. (Cohen 2008, p. 39)

Now, the justification given by Rawls for paying higher salaries to the talented has the following structure:

Economic inequalities are justified when they make the worst off people materially better off. (Major premise)

When the top marginal rate is 40 percent, (a) the talented rich produce more than they do when it is 60 percent, and (b) the worst-off are, as a result, materially better off. (Minor premise)

Therefore, the top tax should not be raised above 40 percent to 60 percent. (Cohen 2008, p. 34)

Cohen claims that there is a strong affinity between the two arguments.<sup>40</sup> To see this, all we have to do is imagine the Rawlsian argument articulated by the talented and addressed, in second-personal terms, to the worst-off. If we do that, we will observe that both the kidnapper and the talented egoist *make* the minor premise true. That is, the kidnapper makes it true that, if he does not get the money, he will not return the child. Likewise, the talented who insist on high salaries or profits make it true that, if they do not get the high reward, they will work less hard (to the detriment of the worst-off). Now, the kidnapper's conditional

Unless you pay me, I shall not return your child.

involves, for Cohen two wrongs. First, the kidnapper's making the conditional true is wrong, because unjust: kidnapping people for money is an injustice. But it is

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40. Of course, he grants that the behaviour of the kidnapper and the behaviour of the talented egoist are dis-analogous in many respects (Cohen 2008, p. 41). But there is one respect in which they are analogous, namely in encroaching upon justice and community in an objectionable way.

also wrong because it violates community. For the kidnapper’s behaviour does not pass what Cohen calls the “interpersonal test”:

This test how robust a policy argument is by subjecting it to variation with respect to who is speaking and/or who is listening when the argument is presented. The test asks whether the argument could serve as a justification of a mooted policy when uttered by any member of society to any other member. (Cohen 2008, p. 42)

The kidnapper’s locutionary (and illocutionary) acts thus fail the interpersonal test, and therefore place him beyond the pale of community with others. The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for the talented egoists of the marketplace. (see Cohen 2008, pp. 54-62 for defence of the analogy) <sup>41</sup>

Having mounted the attack against Rawls with an argument from community, Cohen develops a taxonomy between the inequalities Rawls is committed to tolerating, and the ones - Cohen thinks - Rawls *ought* to tolerate. The relevant possibilities are outlined in Table 1 below:

Acceptable Inequalities <sup>42</sup>		
	Intention-Relative	Intention-Independent
Lax Difference Principle	all	all
Intermediate	some	all
Strict	none	all
Absolute	none	none

Table 1: Inequalities and Personal Behaviour

41. It is sometimes unclear whether the ideal of community, which Cohen calls “justificatory community,” elicits a criterion of (the extent of) community, or whether it corresponds to a practical *norm* that ought to prevail in any desirable form of society. If, as he claims, “justificatory community is a set of people among whom there prevails a norm of comprehensive justification” (Cohen 2008, p. 43), the interpersonal test being a necessary condition for such justification, then arguably only full democratisation and accountability in economic life would fit the bill. I shall come back to this question in Section 2.4.

42. I call the relevant inequalities “acceptable” and not “just” because Cohen thinks inequality to be not merely unjust, but also as violating the *justice-independent* value of community. That the latter value is justice-independent seems to follow from certain remarks made by Cohen (2009), which I discuss in Section 1.6, and reconstruct more fully in Section 2.3, below.

The “lax” interpretation of Rawls’ difference principle holds that any inequalities necessary to render the worse-off better off are acceptable, regardless of whether they issue from conscious individual choice or not. The ‘strict’ interpretation of that principle holds that only such inequalities not stemming from conscious individual choice are acceptable (and the intermediate position stands between the “lax” and the “strict” interpretations). Cohen’s 2008 position corresponds to what I have called the “absolute” difference principle, which dubs all relevant inequalities as unacceptable on grounds justice and community, insofar as *fundamental* principles of justice are concerned.

In response to a putative Rawlsian defence of intention-relative inequality, Cohen briefly returns to the Marxian idea of alienation. He argues that, faced with a charge of unfraternal behaviour, the talented will tend to reify their intentions: “In [the] rhetoric of the rich, a declaration of intention masquerades as a description of something beyond choice: the rich present themselves in third-personal terms, in alienation from their own agency.” Thus under typical market structures “the will of a class is depicted by its members as a sociological fact.” (Cohen 2008, p. 66) Cohen concludes the “Incentives” chapter in pessimistic tone, claiming that he has “not rejected the difference principle in its lax reading as a principle of public policy” conjecturing that “the injustice that goes with incentives is the best injustice we can get.” (Cohen 2008, pp. 84-85)

Cohen’s argument so far has been that, since Rawls explicitly denies the talented complaints of desert, merit, or entitlement in support of greater reward, there exists no reason - indeed, there seems to be reason not - to reward the talented, i.e., “those who have.” At this juncture Cohen turns his sights to another Rawlsian argument propounded in support of greater reward for the talented, one which enlists the Pareto principle.<sup>43</sup> His critique picks up from Rawls’ dialectic of equality, the

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43. A distribution X is Pareto superior to Y if and only if X makes at least someone better off and no one worse off. The Pareto principle always mandates Pareto improvements, i.e. movements from X to Y when X is Pareto superior to Y (and vice-versa).

transition from the *laissez-faire* of “natural liberty” to the liberalism of “careers open to talents,” to Rawlsian “democratic equality.” Cohen claims that the rationale for moving from the second form of equality to the third contradicts Rawls’ Pareto-inspired endorsement of inequality. To see this, consider:

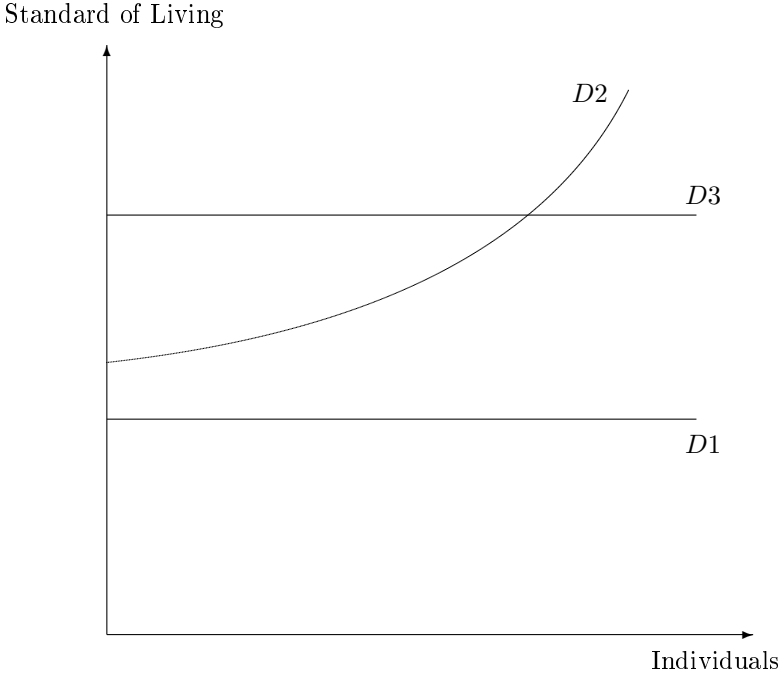


Figure 1: Inequality and the Pareto Argument

The vertical axis represents standard of living. The horizontal axis represents the set of individuals ordered such that those further to the right enjoy a standard of living at least as good as those to their left. Cohen writes:

If D3 is feasible *and* talented people are willing to produce [at an equal rather than unequal wage], then Rawls’ claim about the irrationality of insisting on equality in the face of the possibility of a Pareto-superior inequality would lose its force, since a Pareto-improving *equality-preserving* move, in which no one is as badly off as some are in D2, would now also be available. (Cohen 2008, p. 101)

Thus the Pareto argument begs the question against Cohen’s incentives critique. For “in normal circumstances nothing but the unwillingness (be it justified or not)

of the talented to share equally the greater produce produced in D2 could make D3 impossible when D2 is possible.” (Cohen 2008, p. 102) Cohen is now in a position to claim that “there is no reason for an egalitarian to regard D2 as acceptable, and every reason for him to recommend D3.” (Cohen 2008, p. 105) For the original motivation impelling the egalitarian towards (Rawlsian) democratic equality was to extinguish disadvantage “arbitrary from a moral point of view.” And, if so, how *could* D2 ever be recommended as more just than D3? <sup>44</sup> The question of the justifiability of (Rawlsian) market structures turns crucially, for Cohen, on the question of the justifiability of incentives.

Importantly, Cohen believes Rawls cannot bite the bullet on his incentives critique, as that would turn him into a “radical egalitarian socialist” (Cohen 2008, p. 129), whose outlook would be profoundly averse to “deep” social inequalities Rawls explicitly avows. This comment sheds equal light into what Cohen thinks of Rawlsian egalitarianism, and into what he thinks “radical socialism” consists.

## 1.6 Socialism’s Last Stand?

The very last essay published by Cohen is entitled *Why not Socialism?*<sup>45</sup> Its conceptual ancestors were his two earlier essays “Back to Socialist Basics” and “A Future of a Disillusion,” along with a more recent article of the same title.<sup>46</sup> The essay lays bare central elements of Cohen’s earlier critique of Rawls and his conception of socialist society. It is, I think, worth taking as seriously as Cohen’s longer works. For he is not here so much engaging in polemic, as *expounding* on particular links between his earlier views.

At the centre of Cohen’s argument is the idea of a camping trip, in which “people cooperate within a common concern, that, so far as is possible, everybody has a roughly similar opportunity to flourish, and also to relax, on condition that she

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44. For an ever more forceful charge of inconsistency against Brian Barry’s deployment of the Pareto argument, see Cohen 2008, p. 112.

45. Cohen 2009.

46. Cohen 2001.

contributes, appropriately to her capacity, to the flourishing and relaxing of others.” (Cohen 2009, pp. 4-5) As in most of his essays before *Why not Socialism?*, Cohen’s central concern is not just to defend socialism against pro-capitalist pundits, but also to defend socialism against advocates of the *market*. He asks: “isn’t... the socialist way, with collective property and planned mutual giving, rather obviously the *best* way to run a camping trip, whether or not you actually *like* camping?” (Cohen 2009, p. 10) In fleshing out the ideals realised in that trip, Cohen defends luck egalitarianism, which he dubs ‘socialist equality of opportunity’ (Cohen 2009, pp. 22-23) and claims that the market is intrinsically unjust:

The market... is a casino from which it is difficult to escape, and the inequalities that it produces are tainted with injustice for that reason. Whatever else is true, it is certainly safe to say that the yawning gulf between rich and poor in capitalist countries is not largely due to luck and the lack of it in optional gambling, but is rather a result of unavoidable gambling and straightforward brute luck. (Cohen 2009, p. 33)

In the course of the discussion, he also endorses the idea of a justificatory community (Cohen 2009, pp. 35-37), previously rehearsed in *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, and dubs the relations such community embraces “communal reciprocity.” Communal reciprocity is the “antimarket principle according to which I serve you not because of what I can get in return by doing so but because you need or want my service, and you, for the same reason, serve me.” (Cohen 2009, p. 39)

But how are the ideals of just equality and justificatory community related? Cohen writes:

I believe that certain inequalities that cannot be forbidden in the name of socialist equality of opportunity should nevertheless be forbidden, in the name of community. But is it an *injustice* to forbid the transactions that generate those inequalities? Do the relevant prohibitions merely define the terms within which justice will operate, or do they sometimes (justifiably?)

contradict justice? I do not know the answer to that question. (Cohen 2009, p. 37)

Now, whether or not community *circumscribes* the “terms within which justice operates” and whether or not the moral claims generated by community are *compatible* with those generated by justice, the passage implies that community and justice are distinct moral values doing distinct moral work. That is, compatible or not, these two values occupy different positions in Cohen’s argumentative architectonic, and the edifice of socialism which that architectonic erects and constitutes (see, in this connection, Cohen’s comments on the car owner who is – unjustifiably but *not* unjustly - out of community with his interlocutor, in Cohen 2009, pp. 35-36). And if we assume, not implausibly, that Cohen is here merely elaborating on his earlier work, then we can safely infer that the wrong-makers which played a central role in his critique of Rawlsian incentives, namely injustice and lack of community, should also be treated as distinct values, generating distinct moral claims.

In line with much of Cohen’s post-1990’s work, *Why not Socialism?* is quite pessimistic about democratic socialist practice, although he argues at length in favour of its desirability. In the final section of the essay, devoted entirely to feasibility questions, Cohen outlines Roemer’s proposals in favour of market socialism and the egalitarian (market-simulating) schema of Joseph Carens.<sup>47</sup> He asks:

Could we go further than Roemer in a nonmarket direction? I do not know whether the needed refinements are possible, nor do I know, speaking more generally, whether the full socialist ideal is feasible, in the Carensian, or in some other form. We socialists don’t *now* know how to replicate camping trip procedures on a nationwide scale, amid the complexity and variety that comes with nationwide size. We don’t *now* know how to give collective ownership and equality the real meaning that it has in the camping trip story but which did it didn’t have in the Soviet Union. (Cohen 2009, p.

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47. See Roemer 1994 and Carens 1981.

75)

Cohen suggests that the way forward must be sought in superior forms of social technology that harness human generosity, rather than the market, which relies principally on the motives of fear and greed. Moreover, he does not explicitly assert that a democratic form of socialism is presently unfeasible. Instead he claims that a desirable form of socialism, i.e. one satisfying the ideals of justice and community *and* does not render all (or most) worse off, is presently unfeasible.<sup>48</sup>

This concludes my - somewhat rushed - attempt to extract Cohen's arguments for socialism from the main *corpus* of his work. On the whole he seems to have been remarkably consistent in his commitment to a "genuine," i.e., non-market, form of socialism. But he came to be more and more pessimistic as to whether it was feasible in the short-to-medium term. Moreover, Cohen's anti-market views are sometimes concealed under the jargon and premises of liberal political philosophy, into which he was consistently - and sometimes ineluctably - drawn. I turn now to an attempt at reconstruction of some of his core arguments for socialism, as chronologically expounded above.

## 2 Reconstruction

Any comprehensive discussion of Cohen's political philosophy would have to touch upon the difficult question whether his later pronouncements on classical Marxism, in particular his discussion of the scarcity and agency problems, leave at least some room for a defence of historical materialism. This question strongly suggests itself in light of Cohen's comments to the effect that "marxism has lost much or most of its carapace, its hard shell of supposed fact." (Cohen 1995, p. 6) That carapace

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48. In terms of Figure 1, Cohen probably believed democratic socialism to be presently feasible at D1, but not at D3, or close to D3. His view is, perhaps, too pessimistic. For it is economically *very* difficult to effect a transition from capitalism to socialism and in the process not render at least *someone* at the lower end of the distribution better off: any form of socialism implemented in the near future would, in all likelihood, not be Pareto inferior to D2. The Pareto principle is, in practice, much weaker than Cohen made it out to be in the context of anti-Rawlsian polemic.

being historical materialism, or its central theses, the prospects for a Marxist theory of history along the lines espoused by Cohen seem quite thin, to say the least. But, at any rate, Cohen himself seems to have thought his critical pronouncements not inconsistent with historical materialism. For he reaffirmed his own commitment to the latter in a brief 1999 essay,<sup>49</sup> long after his criticisms of *classical* Marxism were proffered. The question of congruence between his Marxian commitment and these criticisms cannot be addressed here. There are, nevertheless, obvious indirect links between Cohen's historical materialism, on the one hand, and his theory of socialism, on the other. These are his theory of exploitation – for Cohen a subset of unfair treatment - and his theory of freedom. I shall begin my reconstruction of his vision of socialism from freedom, which occupied his gestures towards political philosophy from the start, and then proceed to his views of justice and community.

## 2.1 Freedom, Objective and Subjective

Two types of freedom play a central role in Cohen's work. The first I shall call *objective* and the second *subjective* freedom. Objective freedom can be defined negatively -as opportunity for action, or absence of liability to interference- or positively -as effective autonomy of, or capability for, action. It bifurcates into an individual and a collective branch. Individual freedom is A's freedom to X. Collective freedom is A's *and* B's freedom to X.<sup>50</sup> Subjective freedom, on the other hand, can be defined as A's X-ing *freely*, roughly A's X-ing from reasons he “does not mind acting from.” (See Cohen 1988, p. 243, for his elaboration on the use of the adverbial form in “freely”) I shall look at objective and subjective freedom in turn.

Although Cohen's discussion of individual freedom usually occurs in the midst of polemic, he often criticises its identification with negative freedom, and indeed asserts that freedom “is compromised by lack of means.”<sup>51</sup> What he is more in-

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49. Cohen 1999.

50. Objective freedom is, roughly, concerned with the constraints imposed on peoples' lives by the relations of production. See Section 1.2 for Cohen's views of the relationship between individual and collective freedom.

51. See, for example, Cohen 1998, p. 7.

interested in showing, however, is that capitalist private property (as well as lack of money) directly restricts freedom, however the latter is construed. Hence defenders of private property, “who oppose interference as such. . . oppose interference with the rights of private property, but they support interference with access by the poor to that same private property.” (Cohen 1998, p. 25) This permits him to argue that since “capitalist economies are often thought superior to state-controlled economies, from the point of view of freedom, just in that there is a wider dispersion of property in the former,” then “by that token, a market socialist society, with far wider dispersion of property, and, consequently, of the freedom that goes with it, is even better.” (Cohen 1998, p. 24)

But socialism is not desirable just because it facilitates a superior distribution of individual freedom. It is also superior because it allows collective freedom: it permits *en masse* human self-emancipation, by removing the collective unfreedom that “generates individual unfreedoms” (Cohen 1988, p. 270) for the vast majority of the world’s population. Cohen contrasts collective freedom with collective autonomy in his later work, and asserts that the former, though not the latter, has intrinsic value.<sup>52</sup>

Unlike objective freedom, which has to do with an agent’s objective predicament, subjective freedom is concerned with an agent’s motivational set.<sup>53</sup> I shall call A subjectively free if and only if A’s motivating reasons for X-ing can be arrived at through some sound deliberative route independently of what external agents do that bears on A’s decision to X.<sup>54</sup> If we assume that subjective freedom is desirable, how does capitalism fare on that count? Cohen believes that, under capitalism,

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52. “Except in the totally irrelevant sense of non-subjection to another collective.” (Cohen 1995, p. 260) I shall return to the question of collective autonomy in Section 2.4 below.

53. The distinction between objective and subjective freedom is obviously reminiscent of Hegel. But as I have drawn the distinction, it is inconsistent with the way Hegel draws (or seems to have drawn) it. For Hegel would not necessarily label A’s increased liability to interference as a reduction in A’s objective freedom, although he might grant that it reduces his subjective freedom. Cohen could, of course, *also* accede to the latter possibility, à la Hegel, but would by stipulation count increased liability to interference as a reduction in objective freedom. For recent defence of the distinction in Hegel, see Patten (2002, chapters 2 and 3).

54. For a similar definition see A. J. Julius (forthcoming). Julius is interested not in subjective unfreedom, but in a broader notion of wrongful coercion.

workers are forced to sell their labour power. And since forcing typically involves not acting from reasons arrived at in the proper way (call this “acting for the wrong reason”), it follows that workers are not subjectively free.<sup>55</sup>

Now, some idea akin to that of subjective freedom runs, I think, through most of Cohen’s work on inequality and exploitation. He asserts, for example, that “a transfer of product is unjust if and only if it occurs for the wrong reason.” By “reason” he means motivating reason for engaging in the transfer. For he proceeds to assert that “if an unreciprocated transfer reflects nothing but different *preferences* in a straightforward way, the transfer is not unjust.” (Cohen 1995, p. 199, emphasis provided) In a similar vein, Cohen condemns prostitution and rape for the subjective unfreedom they both imply: “in each of rape and prostitution... the wanted thing is yielded for the wrong reason.” (Cohen 2008, p. 224) Again, in light of his use of the adverbial clause, “wrong reason” is to be construed subjectively. For in the communist society he favours “labour is given *freely*,” or, better, “labour, like love, should, if given, be given *freely*.” (Cohen 2008, p. 225, emphasis provided)

Cohen must therefore think that, under the needs-satisfying socialism or communism he advocates, the dominant form of economic transfer would cease to be one of subjective unfreedom. That is, it would cease to be one in which A yields X to B for the wrong motivating reason - namely, for lack of reasonable alternative. As we shall see below, the norms of justice and community that also constitute - for Cohen - the ideal of socialism, unite subjective and objective freedom under the banner of non-instrumental, mutual satisfaction of everyone’s genuine needs.<sup>56</sup>

## 2.2 Justice and the Egalitarian *Ethos*

Cohen believed that no theory of freedom (as opposed to *liberty*, normatively defined) can offer a complete picture of the just society: only a theory of (distributive)

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<sup>55</sup>. “Typically” is in order here because A may be forced to do something he fully intends to do, as when he genuinely wants to please his sadistic girlfriend and does not mind the attendant violence.

<sup>56</sup>. For Cohen’s early endorsement of the unity between objective and subjective freedom (albeit not stated in these terms), see Cohen 2000a, pp. 130-133.

justice can do so. He thus set out to defend a luck egalitarian theory of justice. From there he went on to identify any uncultivated lack (in a morally significant dimension) with “genuine need:” for Cohen, justice consists in the satisfaction of genuine (meaning: uncultivated) need.<sup>57</sup> This principle is, he claims, strongly anti-market, since:

markets can ‘produce’ justice only in the Pickwickian sense that they do so when in some unattainable possible world they are so comprehensively rigged that they induce a distribution that qualifies as just for reasons that have nothing to do with how market prices form. (Cohen 2004, p. 18)

I have argued, in the first part of this essay, that most of Cohen’s theoretical endeavours are not motivated by an aversion to inequality *simpliciter*, but also from an aversion to the vagaries of markets -vagaries which, no doubt, include injustice. But although the genuine-need-satisfaction theory of justice condemns markets (and *a fortiori* capitalism), Cohen’s condemnation of markets does not presuppose this theory of justice. His work seeks, theory-of-justice-independently, to vindicate that condemnation. Chronologically, it begins from a theory of the maldistribution of freedom under capitalism (in *History, Labour and Freedom*), moves on to a critique of libertarian property rights (in *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*) to a diagnosis of the “deeply inegalitarian” structure of Rawls’ theory (in *If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re so Rich*) to the “cheap” fraternity of liberal egalitarianism (in *Rescuing Justice and Equality*). The last two of these critiques turn, to a large extent, on Cohen’s views about the behaviour of talented egoists in the market. And that critique makes implicit use of the idea of an egalitarian *ethos*, which Cohen takes to be necessary for a just society. But what exactly is the connection between the egalitarian ethos and justice?

The answer: as far as justice is concerned, the ethos is a mere *causal vehicle* to

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57. It bears noting that there is nothing perfectionist, or non-neutral with respect to conceptions of the good, about this conception of “advantage.” For “genuine” may be construed content-neutrally –it can include, for example, preference satisfaction, among other things.

the achievement of just distribution. That is, the ethos in itself serves nothing other than the realisation of justice. This follows from Cohen's remark that

Under abnormal conditions, justice might be consistent with *universal self-interested maximising*: if, for example, talents and utility functions are identical, then initial equality of tangible assets might be considered sufficient for justice. (Cohen 2008, p. 73, emphasis provided)<sup>58</sup>

But, even if the ethos is merely causally necessary insofar as justice is concerned, it does not follow - for a value pluralist like Cohen - that it is merely causally necessary *tout court*. Indeed, I shall now argue that once the value of community comes into play, the ethos assumes a much more substantive ethical role in his account of socialist society.

### 2.3 Community and Justice: Treating People as Equals

Cohen was a value pluralist in his moral philosophy. He affirmed the following three theses:

(i) there exists a plurality of different values,

that are:

(ii) mutually irreducible, or imperfectly reducible to one another,

and, in most cases,

(iii) potentially in conflict with one another<sup>59</sup>

In light of remarks he made after the publication of *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (see Section 1.6 above), it seems plausible to assume justice and community are, for him, distinct values doing distinct moral work. It may be worth further substantiating this claim from material in that book. Consider again the kidnapper example

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58. See also his distinction between an "accidentally" and a "constitutively" just society, where Cohen insists that the predicate "just" be principally "applied to distribution," in Cohen 2000b, p. 132.

59. Cohen actually thought that different forms (or "aspects" as he calls them in Cohen 2008, p. 323) of the *same* value, such as comparative and non-comparative forms of justice, are potentially at odds with one another. For this recurring pluralist motif, see Cohen 1989, p. 908, Cohen 1995, pp. 25, 257, and Cohen 2008, pp. 274-279, 315-320.

(rehearsed in Section 1.5). For Cohen, there is injustice in making the threatening conditional “if you do not pay me, I will not return the child” true. But that is not the *only* wrong-maker here. For there’s the further salient fact about this case, that of the *implicit dialogical relationship* between the kidnapper and the child’s parents. That is, when structured in second-personal terms, the dialogue between the kidnapper and the parents involves both saying, and *in* saying doing, something objectionable. In other words, both the kidnapper’s locutionary and illocutionary acts, along with his other vices, place the kidnapper beyond the pale of justificatory community with others.<sup>60</sup>

There is, I think, a subtle division of moral labour in Cohen’s argument: we have seen (in Section 2.2) how justice principally judges *outcomes* and distributions. Cohen’s conception of community, on the other hand, principally judges *motivation*, or one’s putative reasons for action. Now, his interpersonal test, posited as a necessary condition of community, judges the kidnapper to be out of line not merely because of *what* he (dialogue-independently) does, but also because of *how* he would go about justifying it. Abduction of children is – normally - pretty bad, but abduction of children for money is arguably much worse than abduction of children to save their lives. Thus Cohen claims that

although what is (mainly) bad about the kidnapper is not his voicing the argument, but his making its minor premise true, he should still be ashamed to voice the argument, just because he makes that premise true. The fact that in some cases he would do further ill not to voice the argument does not falsify the claim that in all cases he reveals himself to be ghastly when he does voice it. (Cohen 2008, p. 40)<sup>61</sup>

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60. Steven Darwall has recently defended a second-personal standpoint as an irreducible claim-generating moral perspective in Darwall (2004). Darwall’s argument may not entail the substantive commitments Cohen puts forward, but it is methodologically congenial to Cohen. For certain moral demands are, for Darwall, “irreducibly second-personal,” i.e., they cannot, without loss, be presented in terms other than “I-thou.” This claim, if true, would reinforce the moral robustness of Cohen’s deployment of the interpersonal test.

61. It seems to follow from the “just because...” clause that Cohen believes community suffers *only if* justice suffers. This claim is at odds with his professed agnosticism about potential conflict between justice and community and flatly contradicts his discussion of the complaining car owner who is –unjustifiably but *not* unjustly- out of

The division of moral labour argument just rehearsed, according to which justice principally judges distribution and community judges motivation, fits nicely with Cohen's consistent anti-market polemic, not only on grounds of the (unjust) distribution the latter tends to engender, but also on grounds of the (unfraternal) motivation markets embrace and foster. Echoing earlier remarks from his critique of market socialism (see, for example, Cohen 1995, pp. 254-262), he writes:

Communal reciprocity is not the same thing as market reciprocity, since the market motivates productive contribution not on the basis of commitment to one's fellow human beings and a desire to serve them while being served *by* them, but on the basis of cash reward. The immediate motive to productive activity in market society is (not always but) typically some mixture of greed and fear... These are horrible ways of seeing other people, however much we have become habituated and inured to them, as a result of centuries of capitalist civilisation. (Cohen 2009, pp. 39-41)

One reason to abandon markets of all varieties, even socialist ones, is that they breed injustice. But a distinct reason is that 'market exchange... tends against the value of community.' (Cohen 2009, p. 75)<sup>62</sup> Thus Cohen proposes an ethos that enunciates the conjunction "serve-and-be-served," as a sufficient (though perhaps not necessary) condition for realizing justificatory community. That ethos, in combination with a distribution satisfying genuine need, can, he says, produce a wholly desirable form of socialism: the satisfaction of need would gradually diminish the element of fear, pervasive in "capitalist civilisation," while use of proper "social tech-

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community with his poorer interlocutor (see Cohen 2009, pp. 35-36). Cohen explicitly interprets his own view as involving a 'trade-off between fraternity and fairness' in Cohen (2006, p. 443). But whether he actually thought that justice is a presupposition of community, or not, does not impugn the point plainly entailed by this passage, that the *making* of the minor premise true and the *voicing* of that premise are distinct moral wrongs. The voicing elicits the further demand that the kidnapper be (more) ashamed for his behaviour. Unlike Cohen, Darwall asserts that guilt, and not shame, is the singular most (second-personally) apt emotion in kidnapper-like cases (see Darwall 2004, p. 48). But perhaps Cohen's "you should be ashamed!" just means here: "feel guilty!"

62. Compare (early) Marx's "Comments on James Mill": "I have produced for myself and not for you, just as you have produced for yourself and not for me. In itself, the result of my production has as little connection with you as the result of your production has directly with me. That is to say, our production is not man's production for man as a man, i.e., it is not *social* production... Each of us sees in his product only the objectification of his *own* selfish need, and therefore in the product of the other the objectification of a *different* selfish need, independent of him and alien to him.(Marx 1986, 31-32). See also Cohen's interpretation of Marxian communism, as a "concert of mutually supporting self-fulfillments" in Cohen 1995, p. 123.

nology” harnessing peoples’ generous - rather than base - motives, would gradually diminish the element of greed.

Now, it may turn out that this division of moral labour argument helps complete Cohen’s conception of what it means to treat others as equals. On this view, treating you as an equal involves viewing you as someone whose genuine needs ground claims on *me*, the satisfaction of which ought to be mediated by direct (dialogically acceptable) concern for *you* - rather than concern for what I will get in return. The satisfaction of need corresponds to demands of justice, the directness of concern to demands of community.<sup>63</sup>

If the analysis above is correct, then Cohen’s *ethos* is doing two things. First, it is causally necessary for achievement of egalitarian justice. But it is, in addition, an element indispensable to community, at least when embodied in the conjunction serve-and-be-served. Hence the *ethos* is both causally (for justice) and axiologically (for community) necessary in the context of Cohen’s argument.

## 2.4 Democracy and Economic Planning

I turn now to a brief discussion of economic democracy. Although the idea of democracy, and its connection with economic planning, seem to have exercised Cohen for years,<sup>64</sup> most of his discussions of planning have come under the rubric of community or freedom. Yet one -perhaps *the*- way to make sense of his ideal of

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63. Darwall thinks the Kantian notion of treating people as ends in themselves can only be meaningfully fulfilled in second-personal terms. This thought is again congenial to Cohen, for whom the wrong of purely instrumental uses of others can only be fully understood once the *dialogue* pregnant in, or elicited by, social relationships comes adequately into view. Cohen’s interpersonal test is, in many ways, a screening device permitting him to track down and substantially distinguish between instrumental and non-instrumental uses of people. It is worth noting that these arguments have more than passing resemblance with Jürgen Habermas’ “discourse ethics,” although Cohen was -almost certainly- not acquainted with Habermasian moral philosophy.

64. “There’s actually much less inequality now than there was, say, 100 years ago. Then, only a few radicals proposed that everyone should have the vote. Others thought that was a dangerous idea, and most would have considered it to be an unrealistic one. Yet today we have the vote. We are a political democracy. But we’re not an economic democracy. We don’t share our material resources, and most people in this country would regard that as an unrealistic idea. Yet I think it’s an idea whose time will come. Society won’t always be divided into those who control its resources and those who have only their own labour to sell. But it’ll take a lot of thought to work out the design of a democratic economic order, and it’ll take a lot of struggle, against privilege and power, to bring it about. The obstacles to economic democracy are considerable. But just as no one, now, would defend slavery, I believe that a day will come when no one will be able to defend a form of society in which a minority profit from the possession of the majority.” (Cohen 1986)

justificatory community is to argue that it mandates wide-ranging norms of democratic justification and accountability in *economic* decision-making. In other words, the justificatory community argument can very plausibly be enlisted in a defence of economic democracy and/or democratic planning.

In the one essay I am aware where Cohen discusses democratic planning, he explicitly frames the discussion in terms of the values of equality, freedom, community and democracy as central to socialist theory and practice.<sup>65</sup> In the context of that discussion, Cohen criticises the (historicist) impulse of marxists to see planning as good in itself, because imparting ‘conscious social purpose’. He writes:

Unlike collective self-direction, democracy is good in itself. The case for it, if one is a principled democrat, is not exhausted by the claim that it produces better results. One can believe that, if A was a bad decision, and B would have been a better one, it says something for A it was taken democratically. By contrast, I would not say about bad things caused by planning: well, at least they were planned. (Cohen 1995, p. 261)

Very little can be inferred from this passage as to the strength of Cohen’s commitment to democratic planning, if only because it again occurs in the context of polemic. All we are entitled to infer is that he was not a pure instrumentalist - the view that the case for democracy is exhausted in its tendency to produce good outcomes - about economic and political structures, and that he considered democratically-organised joint ownership of the means of production superior to private ownership (egalitarian or otherwise).<sup>66</sup>

### 3 Concluding Remarks

I have tried to sketch the development of Cohen’s views on socialism from *Karl*

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65. Cohen (1995, pp. 260-261). One must here add the value of “not too much inefficiency,” in light of Cohen’s later concessions to Rawls on feasibility grounds. See Cohen (2008, pp. 84-85), and footnote 50, above.

66. This follows from the passage just cited and his discussion of joint ownership in Cohen (1995, pp. 83-84). His contradistinction between “the illusory democracy of class-based bourgeois politics” and “a real and complete democracy” are too vague for extraction of a positive thesis.

*Marr's Theory of History to Why not Socialism?*, and to reconstruct some of his normatively salient theses into a coherent account to which he remained committed for much of his life. In his vision of socialist society and his commitment to socialist values – some of which, like fraternity or subjective freedom, are likely to be in tension with traditional liberal principles - Cohen is at one with the revolutionary communists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of his work flows from robust commitment to ideals he was attached to naturally, via pedigree and deep conviction. His relentless defence of these ideals, in addition to his impeccable philosophical standards, will, I think, continue to reward careful study.

It is perhaps most fitting to conclude in Cohen's own words:

Every market, even a socialist market, is a system of predation. Our attempt to get beyond predation has thus far failed. I do not think the right conclusion is to give up. (Cohen 2009, p. 82)

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