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Book Review: G. A. Cohen's *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995

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Left Demonstration at City Hall, New York City, for Equal Rights leader Joe Erazo. [photo: Chris Huestis]

book review: G.A. Cohen's

Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality

New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995

by Jeffery L. Nicholas

A. Cohen's *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* is a collection of previously published essays and four newly written essays brought together under a common context. This common context is the question of why Marxism has failed to answer the challenge of Nozickian libertarianism as set forth in Robert Nozick's *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974). According to Cohen, the failure of Marxism to challenge Nozickian libertarianism results from the fact that Marxism and libertarianism share a fundamental value or premise. This premise is the thesis of self-ownership. Cohen argues that we must reject the thesis of self-ownership because it is incompatible with equality and freedom. He thus revises the relationship between liberty and equality as well as Marxian justice. He rejects both the Nozickian contention that the thesis of self-ownership affirms and guarantees freedom (and is, thus, the only guarantee of freedom) and the Marxian contention that equal distribution of the material means of production based on the thesis of self-ownership results in equality.

In the first three chapters, Cohen extensively attacks Nozick's libertarianism. Nozick begins by conjoining the thesis of self-ownership—that is, that everyone has a right to their own bodies and powers—with the premise that the world is unowned in its original state. From this beginning, Nozick concludes that any sort of egalitarian society would violate the resulting principle of libertarianism: that one is freed to do as one wills with the property one appropriates through exercise of one's bodies and powers. If

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people are allowed to do what they want, then inequality will necessarily result. Cohen holds that the egalitarian can attack this approach in two ways: first, the egalitarian can argue that self-ownership does not necessarily lead to inequality of worldly resources; and second, they might combine an egalitarian approach to worldly resources with a non-denial of self-ownership. Concerning blocking the move from the thesis of self-ownership to the result of inequality of resources, Cohen notes that Nozick begins his justification of original appropriation, on which all other property is justified, through use of the Lockean proviso that "enough and as good be left for others." Cohen rightly argues that Nozick's argument does not work because he weakens Locke's original intent by claiming that the Lockean proviso guarantees only that no one's situation be made worse under an original appropriation of some object. Instead, a defensibly strong Lockean proviso rules out the formation of full liberal private property and puts a stop to Nozick's argument. Further, by calling his theory "libertarian," Nozick implies that freedom is his highest value. However, the liberty which is guaranteed under Nozick's libertarianism is merely formal for the majority of people. A person under Nozickian justice has a formal right to do as s/he wishes, but this right cannot be exercised without access to resources. When resources are unequally distributed, a person is forced to work for others, for example.

With this conclusion, Cohen's real task begins: showing that Marxism rests on the thesis of self-ownership and trying to repair the damage this causes. According to Cohen, conjoining the thesis of self-ownership with an equality of condition results only in a formal freedom—just as Nozick's libertarianism did. Libertarians themselves cannot complain about such a result. However, an egalitarian who values freedom must reject the thesis of self-ownership. Unfortunately, Marx's argument against capitalism and private property relies on the thesis of self-ownership. The Marxist argument against capitalism rests on the claim that the "workers are deprived access to physical productive resources and must therefore sell their labor power to capitalists" (119). Labor power falls under the penumbra of self-ownership: we have the right to do what we wish with our powers, etc. The proletariat must sell this labor power if the proletariat is to live. The proletariat is forced to work for others, and, thus, the self-ownership of the proletariat is violated. "The claim that capitalists steal time from working people implies that the worker is the proper owner of his own power" (146). Consider the joyful worker and the infirm capitalist. The worker enjoys the work performed and the wages the

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worker earns from the work. The capitalist hates life, but has amassed some capital. The capitalist extracts just enough wages from the worker's product in order to maintain the capitalist's life. That is, the worker produces so much product; and the capitalist takes a certain percentage of that product to give to the worker as wages and keeps just the smallest amount to maintain the capitalist's life. Marxists are committed to calling the relationship between the joyful worker and the infirm capitalist unjustly exploitative, even though the worker is happy and the capitalist is miserable. But calling this relationship unjustly exploitative simply affirms the principle of self-ownership.

Rather than affirming the thesis of self-ownership, and maintaining that capitalism and inequality of resources is unjust because both violate the thesis of self-ownership, Cohen holds that a maldistribution of the means of production is not only intrinsically unjust but is also unjust because of what it produces, *viz* inequality. This means rejecting the thesis of self-ownership. Forcing people to do something is not always wrong. Cohen, however, believes that we cannot refute the thesis of self-ownership but only make it less appealing. He argues that the thesis of self-ownership gets its appeal from being confused with three other values. These values include: 1) not being anyone's slave, 2) not restricting human autonomy, and 3) not treating people as mere means. Libertarians argue that autonomy is only guaranteed for people if they possess the rights constituting self-ownership. But, Cohen contends, the "self-seeking authorized by self-ownership" combined with people of varying talents results in a world of propertyless proletarians who have constricted freedom, or, i.e., merely formal freedom (237). Promoting autonomy does not necessitate promoting self-ownership.

Cohen's book is very technical in parts, particularly when he discusses Nozick's libertarianism in the first three chapters. Overall, the arguments against Nozick are satisfactory. But it seems that one might question whether Marxism places such a high value on self-ownership or, if it does, what motivates this value. Throughout the work, a discussion of Marx's theory of alienation is noticeably lacking. This is odd given Cohen's previous work and defense of Marx's theory of history in Karl Marx's Theory of History. In any case, Marx held that what was wrong with capitalism, and with the ownership of the means of production being located in a few hands, was the alienation of the laborer from the laborer's product. The only way a person can recognize one's self as human is through objectifying one's self in social interaction. When the capitalist takes part or all of the product of labor, then labor does not accomplish its end: labor appears alien to

the worker.

More should be said in Cohen's discussion of the joyful worker and the infirm capitalist. The capitalist is still removing something from the laborer: the humanity of the laborer, the role of the laborer in an objective sphere. Affirming that the laborer is joyful appears to beg the question against Marx, rather than presenting a dilemma with which a Marxian analysis cannot cope. The concentration of the means of production in a few hands is intrinsically wrong because it results in alienated labor. All of Cohen's argument against capitalism and inequality misses Marx's basic contention that capitalism alienates the laborer. The principle of self-ownership which is implicit in Nozick, then, is quite different from the principle of self-ownership which can be found in Marx. The first is simply an affirmation of the rights which constitute self-ownership as the most fundamental value in society, while the second rests on attempting to overcome the alienation inherent in economic systems.

The book, however, is worth reading because Cohen raises various points which need to be looked at in further discussions of the value and viability of an egalitarian economic system. While he does not discuss the theme of alienation as described by Marx, ("alienation" is only mentioned on three pages), Cohen does provide trenchant analysis and criticism of Marxist egalitarian goals. Further, his analysis is indeed a revisioning of justice as conceived in Marxism. As such, it provides a useful starting point from a non-Marxist or perhaps a revised-Marxist view for further defenses of egalitarianism. Herein lies the main value of the work. This book would be good for anyone concerned with economic justice, particularly egalitarian approaches to economic distribution, as well as those more generally interested in either Nozick or Marx. I think the fundamental concern for Cohen is attempting to reconcile the old rivalry between freedom and equality. The book therefore provides important reading for those interested in the socio-theoretical concerns of the functioning of society.

References

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Above Civil Rights demonstration at West 73rd St. and Broadway, Manhattan, New York City. [photo: Chris Huestis]