

Article

## COHEN ON SOCIALISM, EQUALITY AND COMMUNITY

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### Abstract

In this article I discuss G. A. Cohen's account of the principles animating the socialist ideal. In his book *Why Not Socialism?* Cohen argues that socialism is based on two principles of radical equality of opportunity and community. Although I am quite sympathetic to Cohen's contribution, I identify what I take to be some problems in it and suggest ways to overcome them. I challenge Cohen's claim that although the principle of radical equality of opportunity is a principle of justice, the principle of community is only a wider moral requirement. I argue that to fully account for the role and weight of considerations of community within the socialist ideal, and to justify the limitations on liberty that they would impose in practice, we have reason to see some of them as more stringent demands of justice. More specifically, I propose a construal of some of the demands of community as focused on sufficientarian

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concerns with basic needs and on requirements to protect equal political status and self-respect, and explain how, so construed, the demands of community relate to demands of equality of economic opportunity and to the protection of personal and political liberty.

### Résumé

Dans cet article, je discute le point de vue de G.A. Cohen sur les principes qui animent l'idéal socialiste. Dans son livre 'Pourquoi Pas Le Socialisme?' Cohen maintient que le socialisme est basé sur les deux principes d'égalité radicale de l'opportunité et de la communauté. Même si je partage assez largement cette conception, j'en identifie quelques problèmes de mon point de vue et suggère quelque pistes pour les combler. Contre Cohen, je ne pense pas que le principe d'égalité radicale d'opportunité soit un principe de justice, alors que le principe de communauté serait seulement un impératif moral plus large. Je maintiens qu'afin de rendre compte pleinement du rôle et du poids des considérations sur la communauté dans l'idéal socialiste, et de justifier les limitations sur la liberté qu'elles imposeraient en pratique, nous avons raison de penser que certaines d'entre elles expriment des demandes fortes de justice. Plus spécifiquement, je propose de reformuler certaines demandes des communautés centrées sur des préoccupations d'autosuffisance relatives à des besoins fondamentaux et sur les conditions de protection de l'égalité politique et du respect de soi, et j'explique comment, sous cet angle, les demandes d'une communauté sont étroitement liées à des demandes d'égalité d'opportunité et de protection de la liberté personnelle et politique.

### Key words

community; equality; freedom; G. A. Cohen; socialism

### Mots-clés

Communauté; égalité; G.A. Cohen; liberté; socialisme

Is socialism a desirable ideal? What principles ground it? In *Why Not Socialism?*<sup>2</sup> G. A. Cohen argues that the socialist ideal is indeed desirable, that we have reason to favor the general implementation of the principles of radical equality of opportunity and community on which it relies. Cohen also considers the issue of the feasibility of socialism. His agnostic conclusion on this issue is that we do not now know whether socialism is feasible or infeasible, although we can realistically envisage multiple partial approximations and instantiations of its demands. In this paper I focus on Cohen's discussion on desirability.<sup>3</sup> Although I am quite sympathetic to Cohen's contribution, I identify what I take to be some problems in it and suggest ways to overcome them. I

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen (2009). Parenthetical page numbers in the paper refer to pages in this book. For helpful explanations of how this book fits within Cohen's overall corpus of writings, see Cunningham (2009) and Vrousalis (2010).

<sup>3</sup> I discuss Cohen's treatment of the issue of feasibility in Gilbert (2011). See also the important recent discussion in Wright (2010).

challenge Cohen's claim that although the principle of radical equality of opportunity is a principle of justice, the principle of community is only a wider moral requirement. I argue that to fully account for the role and weight of considerations of community within the socialist ideal, and to justify the limitations on liberty that they would impose in practice, we have reason to see some of them as more stringent demands of justice. More specifically, I propose a construal of some of the demands of community as focused on sufficientarian concerns with basic needs and on requirements to protect equal political status and self-respect, and explain how, so construed, the demands of community relate to demands of equality of economic opportunity and to the protection of personal and political liberty.

Cohen's aim in his short book is more suggestive and exploratory than systematic. Thus in this paper I do not aim at criticizing Cohen's work for not doing what is not meant to do. My constructive aim is, instead, to pursue the exploration further, identifying additional challenges and proposing fruitful ways to address them. Thus, the goal of this paper is to further frame the issue of how we should think about the principles grounding the desirability of socialism.

### **Socialist Principles of Equality and Community**

Cohen suggests that the socialist ideal is framed by two principles.<sup>4</sup> The first is a principle of equality of opportunity, and the second is a principle of community. In this section I reconstruct these two principles and in the following sections I probe their status and relation.

Equality of opportunity can be construed in different ways, according to the obstacles to people's life chances that are deemed morally desirable to remove or mitigate in an egalitarian way. Cohen proposes a "socialist," "radical principle of equality of opportunity," which includes but goes beyond two other principles of equality of opportunity. The "bourgeois" principle demands that we remove obstacles to life chances springing from certain formal and informal status constraints, such as those undermining the life prospects of serfs in a feudal society or of members of certain groups in societies with a racist culture. Non-discrimination regulations constitute an example of implementation of this principle. The "left-liberal" principle goes further, demanding that we remove inequalities in life prospects that result from unchosen social circumstances such as the social class in which people are born. This principle grounds redistributive

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen presents these principles first as an elucidation of the kind of view that we would adopt if we were thinking about how to organize our affairs as co-participants in a camping trip, and then proceeds to argue that their implementation is also desirable in the wider context of a modern society. Even further, he says that socialists might want these principles to apply on an international scale (p. 46). For simplicity, I will focus here only on the context of a domestic society, leaving aside the issues of local and global justice.

policies, such as the funding for excellent public education, that offset the initial disadvantage faced by people belonging to poorer households. But this principle is insufficient in that it does not address inequalities in life chances that spring from people's differences in native talents. The radical, socialist principle completes the response to the inegalitarian impact on life chances of unchosen circumstances by demanding that we also attend to differing natural endowments. Thus:

[S]ocialist equality of opportunity treats the inequality that arises out of native differences as a further source of injustice, beyond that imposed by unchosen social backgrounds, since native differences are equally unchosen ... Socialist equality of opportunity seeks to correct for *all* unchosen disadvantages, disadvantages, that is, for which the agent cannot herself reasonably be held responsible, whether they be disadvantages that reflect social misfortune or disadvantages that reflect natural misfortune. When socialist equality of opportunity prevails, differences of outcome reflect nothing but differences of taste and choice, not differences in natural and social capacities and powers (p. 17-8).<sup>5</sup>

The socialist principle of equality of opportunity (hereafter SPE) does not demand equality of outcome. It is compatible with inequalities of benefit that result from people's choices against a background of equality of opportunity. Cohen mentions three kinds of inequalities of this kind. The first concerns differences with respect to certain specific goods. For example, Amy may end up having more income than Ben, while Ben more leisure time than Amy. This kind of difference is not, according to Cohen, one we need to worry about. The reason is that it does not constitute "an inequality all things considered," as "comparable aggregate enjoyment obtains" (p. 25). We are assuming here that each person's packages of benefits reflect their preference regarding different goods. Thus, Amy and Ben are equally content given that Amy values income more than Ben and Ben values leisure more than Amy.

Cohen considers two other kinds of inequalities that do involve differences in overall benefit. The first ranges over inequalities resulting from "*regrettable choice*," and the second concerns inequalities arising from "*option luck*" (p. 26). Thus, Alberto may end up having less of a good G than Beatriz, even though Alberto values G just as much as Beatriz does and has equal initial chances to get it, because Alberto puts less effort to obtain it (a regrettable choice), or because Alberto chooses to engage in a risky activity one of whose possible outcomes is a diminished ability to access G (thus undergoing bad

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<sup>5</sup> This is the so-called "luck-egalitarian" principle, according to which "an unequal distribution whose inequality cannot be vindicated by some choice or fault or desert on the part of (some of) the relevant affected agents is unfair, and therefore, *pro tanto*, unjust" (Cohen 2008, 7).

option luck). An example of the first case is Alberto's careless decisions regarding training and education, and an example of the second case is Alberto's choice to engage in gambling or risky investments.

These forms of inequality of outcome are problematic for socialists because socialism includes, besides a commitment to SPE, a commitment to a principle of community. This principle (hereafter PC), is first formulated in the following, general form:

The requirement of community ... is that people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another (p. 34-5).

Cohen discusses two modes of expression of PC. The first is geared to narrowing the inequalities that might emerge in a context in which SPE operates. In such a context, people committed to PC would feel that their communal bonds are weakened if some of them turn out to face many more challenges in their lives than others due to significant inequalities of income and other material advantages. They may then choose to eliminate some social arrangements leading to such inequalities, or to offset some of their results.

The second mode of expression is "communal reciprocity." This expression of PC is not focused on narrowing inequality that SPE allows, but on shaping "human relationships" in such a way that they "take a desirable form:"

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 (p. 39).

The relationship between us under communal reciprocity is not the market instrumental one in which I give you because I get, but the noninstrumental one in which I give you because you need, or want, and in which I expect a comparable generosity from you (p. 43).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the kind of community Cohen has in mind is not the one envisaged by some "communitarian" views according to which social and political cooperation must proceed on the basis of shared thick conceptions of the good life. The solidarity at stake is not the narrow solidarity of specific groups or associations, but a human solidarity that can in principle extend universally (see note 3 above). See also Cohen (2008, 42-45), where a kind of "justificatory community" is invoked, in which political proposals are tested on the basis of whether they could be justified in intersubjective encounters amongst those affected. Such form of community is supposed to function in diverse social settings, and is thus "not some soggy mega-*Gemeinschaftlichkeit*" (Cohen 2008, 45). As Vrousalis (2010, 213) helpfully remarks, this

Although communal reciprocity involves, like market reciprocity, acts of giving and taking, there is a crucial difference. Communal reciprocity is not moved by “fear” or “greed,” but by the valuing of “the conjunction *serve-and-be served* as such” (p. 42).<sup>7</sup>

### Community and the Pluralism of Grounds of Justice

Cohen acknowledges that there might be a problem once we think about the relation between PC and SPE. PC is supposed to “constrain” (p. 12), “temper” (p. 34), and “curb” (p. 35) the inequalities that SPE permits. Can this be done without conflict with what justice demands?

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. (It would, of course, be a considerable pity if we had to conclude that community and justice are potentially incompatible moral ideals). (p. 37)

How should we think about this potential conflict? One possibility is indeed to think that PC either (a) constrains or (b) contradicts justice. This possibility would presuppose that PC is a moral demand that is not also a requirement of justice. This interpretation appears to hold for Cohen when he says that the inequalities permitted by SPE

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idea of mutual justifiability resembles the key demands of Habermas’s discourse ethics. For Habermas’s key discursive principles, and their exploration at the political level, see Habermas (1996, 104-111).

<sup>7</sup> Cohen appears to assume that an ethos of equality and community is necessarily at odds with market practices. Roemer (2010, 258-261) challenges this view, arguing that the “coordination function” of markets can be decoupled from their current (in capitalism) “material incentives” function. Socialism’s distributive institutions could eliminate the “fear” factor, and the socialist ethos could overpower the “greed” factor. Motivation to work could still exist on the basis of a will to serve, develop one’s capacities, gain appreciation by others, etc. (For another account of how markets need not be at odds with socialism see Wright 2010, 261-265.) Vrousalis (2010, 197) explains Cohen’s view of the market as involving counter-egalitarian and counter-communitarian motives by saying that Cohen talks about the market in the specific context of what Marx called a “generalized commodity production,” in which the motive of profit is constitutive. It is not clear to me, however, that Cohen does not acknowledge that there could be other, non-profiteering incarnations of the market. He in fact refers to one of them when discussing Carens’s proposal. Carens (1981) envisions a society that uses markets to signal optimal intersections between the demand and supply of goods and services, but taxes all incomes to equality, thus using the coordination function of markets while dropping their current (capitalist) motivational and distributive functions (Cohen 2009, 63-65, 69).

“contradict community” but are “not condemned by justice” (p. 34).<sup>8</sup> This claim would actually force one to think that PC contradicts justice, and it thus yields option (b). One could perhaps rephrase Cohen’s claim to yield option (a), by making the application of SPE conditional upon wider moral constraints (imposed by PC) being met. In both cases, justice would have to be seen as a non-trumping moral value. This is something that many would find implausible.

Although I do not argue here that there are no moral grounds that can override justice, I want to suggest that we do not need to take Cohen’s tack. We can instead see PC, at least in so far as it limits the inequalities permitted by SPE, as itself a requirement of justice.<sup>9</sup> If we see it this way, then PC would not determine the outer bounds of justice per se, but limit the application of a specific demand of justice (viz. SPE). On this interpretation, SPE is a pro tanto principle of justice among others, the scope and weight of whose application cannot be determined without weighing it against other pro tanto principles of justice in an all things considered picture of what justice demands in certain circumstances.

The advantages of pursuing this approach are mainly two. The first is that we do not need to answer the question Cohen does not know how to answer: we do not need to think about how community as a non-justice value might limit justice, and we can deflect the need to “conclude that community and justice are potentially incompatible ideals”.<sup>10</sup> The second advantage is that this approach helps us to develop a plausible construal of justice as including several demands besides economic equality of opportunity. On this pluralist view, determining what we owe to each other, as a matter of justice, in our social life, involves weighing a diversity of grounds of justice as they might apply in different circumstances. I do not only think that this view of justice is intrinsically plausible; I also think that there is textual evidence that Cohen himself accepts it.<sup>11</sup> This pluralist approach could not only factor in some demands of community as demands of justice.

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<sup>8</sup> Similarly, when Cohen says that “the socialist aspiration is to extend community and justice to the whole of our economic life” (pp 80-1), he seems to assume that community is not an aspect of justice.

<sup>9</sup> How are demands of justice different from wider demands of morality? This is an important question that Cohen does not answer in the book we are examining here. We do not find much help in his other recent book, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*. There Cohen defines justice by appeal to the “ancient dictum that justice is giving each person her due” (Cohen 2008, 7). But many obligations that we normally take to pertain to morality in the wider sense also involve giving persons their due.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, as the rest of this paper shows, this does not mean that we will not have to face difficult questions about the balancing of different moral considerations *within* the domain of justice. Furthermore, I am not denying that there are valid questions about the relation between moral considerations of justice and other moral considerations that do not pertain to the domain of justice.

<sup>11</sup> See Cohen (2008, 4-5, 7-8) where pluralism of grounds of justice is assumed to exist, and the need for all things considered judgments balancing them is acknowledged. For an illuminating discussion of Cohen’s approach to justice in this book see Tomlin (2010). Notice, furthermore, that there is nothing in what Cohen says in *Why Not Socialism?* that prevents him from endorsing principles of justice other than SPE.

We can, for example, see considerations about the importance of personal choice and political self-determination as also grounds of justice. These are considerations that already operate in Cohen's book, and it makes sense to think about how they, like PC, might weigh against SPE and other grounds.

I will thus explore how we might think about (some interpretations of) PC as a ground of justice. I will entertain two considerations, and pursue them in the two sections following the next one. The first refers to specific ways in which PC might weigh against SPE, and the second concerns the relation between PC and considerations of personal choice and political self-determination. In each case, I will have to imagine more circumscribed interpretations of communal, non-instrumental caring than the one presented by Cohen in his statement of PC. This is unavoidable, as the general idea of community as presented in that statement is quite vague. That I do not consider every conceivable and important aspect of the ideal of community is important to keep in mind, as I briefly explain in the next section.

### **Some Caveats and Distinctions**

Before presenting the specific interpretations of PC just promised, I want to introduce a few caveats and distinctions to prevent misunderstandings and to respond to some possible objections.

The first caveat is that the requirements of community that I will proceed to identify are not meant to exhaust the ideal of community. We can distinguish, for example, between forms of concern that address people's wants and those that address their needs. Both appear in the third passage from Cohen regarding communal care that I quoted at the end of the second section. However, in what follows I will only focus on forms of community that target needs (in particular basic needs). The following caveats further develop the present point that I do not pretend in my discussion to exhaust the content of community.<sup>12</sup>

The second and third caveats are related with each other, and concern my treatment of the distinctions between principles of justice and wider principles of morality and between demands focused only on outer behavior and those focused also on attitudes or maxims. The second caveat is that I do not claim that all demands of community are demands of justice. For example, we could say that saying "Good morning" to your neighbors when you encounter them on the stairs of your building when you leave it in the morning is an appropriate expression of community, but we would not want to demand such a practice as a matter of justice. I have no quarrel with this point. Not all forms of communal treatment are owed to others as duties of justice.

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the ideal of community in Cohen see the rich discussion in Miller (2010).



But this is compatible with the point that some of them are, and this conceptual possibility is enough for my purposes.

The third caveat addresses the following possible objection. Communal reciprocity, as presented by Cohen, is centered on the inner attitudes underpinning people's interactions, not merely on the outer behavior (and the distributive outcomes) that such interactions also involve. To respond, it is true that I will largely focus on principles of community ranging over outer behavior. But (and this is the third caveat) I think that they have a natural counterpart at the attitudinal level that should also be pursued. I agree with Cohen that demands of justice should focus on the fostering of a certain ethos in addition to the design of institutions imposing certain forms of regular behavior.<sup>13</sup> What I proceed to say can and should be extended so as to include recommendations concerning the political culture of a socialist society.

Let me elaborate on the last point to dispel a further objection. Someone might complain that to envisage (as I will) coercive institutions to secure communal behavior and outcomes is inconsistent with the ideal of community. For example, a coercive mechanism securing Alicia's contribution to the fulfillment of Bertrand's needs might recruit non-communal motivations (on the part of Alicia) such as fear or greed, which are the opposite of a communal motivation such as generosity or solidarity. In response, we can notice that coercive schemes could recruit both communal and non-communal motivations, and that this may be all things considered acceptable. To see this, we need to notice that in nonideal circumstances (and perhaps in most feasible circumstances) people display both communal and non-communal tendencies. Coercive institutions may be justified (as we will see below) to secure the outcomes that communal concern seeks to secure in the face of obstacles springing from people's non-communal attitudes. But institutions can express communal concern on the part of citizens in their capacities as both law-makers and law-abiders. Citizens can, *out of communal concern*, design and obey institutions that foster communal behavior and outcomes. Why not skip the coercive institutions and just go for communal behavior motivated by communal concern? The answer is: because community oriented citizens also recognize their (and others') motivational frailty, which they offset through institutional mechanisms generating extra-incentives. Certainly this is less than ideal, but it may be all things considered acceptable in the face of some tough facts of the world.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, this acceptance of institutional mediation can, and should, be coupled with a demand to progressively expand (for example through education and public debate) an ethos of

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<sup>13</sup> See Cohen (2008, ch. 3).

<sup>14</sup> It is important to notice that Cohen himself appears to envisage coercive institutional implementations of the ideal of community when he suggests that that ideal may ground "forbidding" certain practices that lead to inequalities of outcome that undermine community (see p. 37).

communal concern that limits the need of coercion and of instrumental rather than solidaristic incentives.<sup>15</sup>

Consider a final objection before proceeding. Is not the whole exercise just semantic relabeling without practical consequence? Given that Cohen himself recognizes that justice as socialist equality of opportunity can conflict with other moral demands, and perhaps needs to yield to them, isn't he allowing for the kind of pluralism and weighing I am calling for? In any case, should we not join Joseph Raz in his puzzlement, reported by Cohen, concerning why we should care so much about what does and what does not belong to justice?<sup>16</sup> What is crucial, we could say, is that we get a clear picture about the content, structure, and relative weight of different moral demands. Whether we call them demands of justice is not decisive. Although I agree that, at the end of the day, it is true that what is crucial is indeed that we have such a picture of our overall moral duties, I still think that considering whether justice includes further demands is valuable for two reasons. The first is that we may simply want to know why some demands of community cannot also be seen as demands of justice. I think that they can, and I find no

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<sup>15</sup> As I explain in Gilibert (2011), we have reason to adopt a transitional standpoint spanning long-term historical change. A transitional standpoint is the standpoint taken by political agents in the process of changing central features of the institutional and cultural environment in which they act. Such agents envisage trajectories of reform involving dynamic duties. These duties are peculiar in that they are not merely focused on what is to be done within certain circumstances, but also on changing certain circumstances so that new things can be done. Interestingly, Karl Marx seemed to adopt a transitional approach in his discussion of the two stages of a "communist society" presented in his "Critique of the Gotha Program" (Marx 1978). The two stages differ as follows. First, in the higher stage, unlike in the lower stage, there is no material scarcity, division of labor is eliminated, and labor becomes inherently attractive. Second, distribution of consumption goods in the higher stage tracks people's needs, whereas in the lower stage it responds to workers' productive contributions (after a set of resources are put aside to secure the reproduction of basic economic and political institutions, the satisfaction of people's basic needs for education and health care, and the provision of benefits for those unable to work). Whereas the lower stage distributes to each according to their contribution (thus following what some Marxists call the Contribution Principle), the latter instantiates the slogan "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs" (the Needs Principle). The Contribution Principle is justified as a pragmatic imperative; its role is to create incentives to increase productivity to make the higher stage of communism attainable. Marx's rationale for limiting the demandingness of distribution in the lower stage is a pragmatic concern with feasibility, not a principled rejection of deeper communal reciprocity or equality. Marx worries that in its lower stage a communist society is "in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges" (Marx 1978, 529). Marx thinks that the Contribution Principle is only a transitional principle, and he clearly sees it as evaluatively inferior to the Needs Principle. The former condones the inequality of rewards that result from individuals having different natural endowments (productive abilities and talents). It is the same principle that "regulates the exchange of commodities," and is "still constantly stigmatized by a bourgeois limitation" (Marx 1978, 530). The fundamental objective is to make the implementation of the "higher" Needs Principle more feasible.

<sup>16</sup> Cohen (2008, 289-90 n. 14).

argument in Cohen's text to the contrary. The second, and more important reason, is pragmatic. Demands of justice are commonly given a certain pride of place in political contexts, so that they are seen as having at least *prima facie* priority. Showing that such a domain of demands includes demands of community (and, as we will see, demands of liberty) will thus make the consideration of their tension with demands of equality of opportunity more salient and urgent.<sup>17</sup>

### How PC Might Weigh Against Inequalities Permitted by SPE

There are at least two ways in which we may interpret PC in such a way that it grounds plausible limits on the inequalities condoned by SPE.<sup>18</sup> One is to link PC with a basic sufficientarian principle according to which we owe each other assistance to reach a minimal threshold of advantage.<sup>19</sup> This minimal threshold can tentatively be seen as comprising the bundle of goods access to which is a precondition for living a minimally decent life. Such a bundle could include, for example, basic provision concerning food, shelter, clothing, and health care. It is in principle possible that some of the individuals who start on equal footing end up below this threshold as a result of regrettable choices and bad option luck. And it would not be far-fetched to say that they are entitled to be brought back to the threshold by others, at least when achieving this would not involve extreme sacrifices on their part. This would require redistribution from the prudent to the imprudent, but it may not be unreasonable to demand it if we see that citizens have reason to take steps to insure *everyone* against predictable frailties and imperfections of human and social life.

Another plausible interpretation of PC is to link it with a concern for status equality and the conditions of self-respect. Some forms of redistribution, even if they unsettle outcomes consistent with SPE, may be warranted if they are necessary to sustain the equal standing of members of a political community. One example of this kind of concern involves securing what Rawls called the "fair value of political liberty".<sup>20</sup> As we will see shortly, socialists care about securing people's political self-determination. One,

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<sup>17</sup> As I said above (see note 10), pluralism about the domain of justice is in fact in tune with Cohen's considered view.

<sup>18</sup> The limitation may occur, as Cohen suggests, by forbidding certain transactions yielding the relevant inequalities, or, alternatively, through redistribution altering the outcomes of the transactions without forbidding them. A possible important difference between these options is that the second is less constraining of personal choice.

<sup>19</sup> For a comprehensive recent discussion of sufficientarianism see Casal (2007).

<sup>20</sup> Rawls (1999, 197-9, 245). Miller (2010: 240) also argues that Cohen's discussion fails to consider this kind of status concern, and the concomitant need to identify some "secure entitlements." I disagree with Miller, however, in that I don't think that introducing these considerations should motivate the rejection (as opposed to the qualification) of the luck-egalitarian principle involved in SPE.

status-based, reason to care about it is that its presence involves a public recognition of everyone as an equal fellow member of the political community who can actively determine its shape besides being passively shaped by it. Now, securing this political status requires that people have access to certain material resources permitting them to enter the political sphere with comparable bargaining power. Where great inequalities of outcome occur, the bargaining power of the worse-off would certainly be seriously depressed unless background mechanisms of redistribution are in place. In addition, the presence of substantially unequal life prospects may undermine the self-respect of those facing significantly lower life prospects. This loss would of course be linked with the diminution of status regarding political influence, but it could ramify into further spheres of action, as the consequences of past inequalities affect subsequent attempts to pursue social advantages.<sup>21</sup>

The foregoing specifications of PC in terms of transfers catering for sufficientarian and social and political status considerations would amount to forms of communal care that can limit the scope of the inegalitarian outcomes compatible with SPE. It is worth noting that these transfers do not aim at eliminating inequalities compatible with SPE. The point is just to reduce them. They do not then saturate the space of distributive considerations in such a way that the idea of responsibility for one's choices underlying SPE is given no room. Responsibility still has weight, but it does not have an absolute one. Its force is checked on the basis of the great importance of other concerns such as caring for each other's survival, self-determination, and self-respect.

Someone might ask: Shouldn't we simply drop SPE? SPE is a case of "luck egalitarianism," which is typically the target of two criticisms. The first is that it demands too much as a principle of justice by requiring compensation for natural misfortune. The second is that it may be too severe, allowing people to suffer unduly because of bad decisions or "option luck". Perhaps we should adopt a different form of egalitarianism. PC already points in the direction of a "social" or "political" conception of equality. This kind of conception is for example defended by Anderson (1999) in her proposal of "democratic equality," which focuses on securing the capabilities for citizens to function as social and political equals. It is not saddled with the demandingness and the harmful severity of a "distributive equality" seeking to compensate for inequalities resulting from natural (and other forms of) misfortune. In addition, it already mobilizes the two concerns I identified under PC: it directly accounts for equal status and self-respect as constitutive concerns of the egalitarian ideal, and it accounts for basic sufficientarian entitlements as indirectly justifiable as preconditions for secure social and political participation.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For a helpful discussion of how inequalities compound over time, with deleterious consequences on people's ability to confidently pursue their life projects, see Barry (2005, 44-45).

<sup>22</sup> I thank a referee for suggesting that I address some of the concerns mentioned in this paragraph.

I think, however, that we should stick to a pluralist framework including a “luck egalitarian” consideration that is weighed against other pro tanto grounds of justice (such as those springing from PC and personal and political liberty). Regarding the first criticism to luck egalitarianism, let me make three points. First, I do not think that it is unappealing for a distributive outlook to target inequalities resulting from natural misfortune. This goal is sometimes disparaged by saying that it is strangely focused on “cosmic injustices.” For example, considering the case in which one’s neighbor is more prone to cancer than oneself. Miller (2010, 234-235) says that “if God were committed to benefitting humanity, God would be unjust in doing less for my neighbor than for me, since there is no basis for discrimination”; but, Miller continues, this reasoning does not seem to apply to oneself here on earth, as Cohen should recognize given that his approach does not rely on theism. One might here be moved to do something for one’s neighbor to pursue “a goal of relief for affliction, not equality.” But this is not right. Why would it be unjust for God not to weigh natural misfortune but not for us when, let’s say, we decide what social arrangements (such as those concerning health care) to favor? In both cases the same egalitarian goal seems appropriate: equalize access to health resources, factoring in natural misfortune, to the extent that you reasonably can. Of course, if God existed, God would be able to do much more than us, but we could do a fair amount, and so we should.

Perhaps the idea is that our concern for justice should be relational, and that the idea of “distributive equality” (including concern for misfortune) misses that. What matters from the point of view justice is whether we live with others in ways that involve domination and exploitation. We should eliminate those if we are to live as equals. We do not need to also try to redress inequalities in life chances due to natural misfortune. Now, I certainly agree that the relational concerns mentioned are crucial, and should be added to the platform of pro tanto grounds of justice. But why stop there? To relate to others in a way that really shows equal respect and concern, we would have to recognize that each one of us has reason not only to resent domination and exploitation. We also have reason to seek opportunities to live flourishing lives, and to resent having fewer such chances than others though no choice or fault of our own. Seen from the supply side: we should not only be concerned with the issue whether we relate to others so that we dominate, exploit, or oppress them. We should also relate to others in such a way that we grant them the same expansive opportunities to live a flourishing life that we seek and think we are entitled to have. Luck egalitarianism need not assume atomistic egoism and self-sufficiency as the norm for human beings. It may express a solidaristic and egalitarian concern for the well-being of all.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> As Cohen puts it when describing the ideals behind the “camping trip,” “people [should] cooperate within a common concern that, so far as possible, everybody has a roughly similar opportunity to flourish,

Of course, such a concern is constrained by considerations of responsibility. But (and this is the third point), responsibility is indeed an important consideration as soon as we take into account the issue of the fair allocation of burdens of cooperation in a social world where resources are scarce. The concern for responsibility in luck egalitarianism is appealing because it tracks the intuition that we should be mindful of the fact that our life choices may impose costs on others.<sup>24</sup>

The last point partially responds to the second criticism, according to which luck egalitarianism is too severe towards those suffering from bad “option luck.” Responsibility is important. However, I think that the second criticism is also partially right, and this is why I think that SPE should be qualified by reference to the sufficientarian and status-egalitarian aspects of PC.<sup>25</sup> But as I said I don’t think that this acknowledgment should carry us over to rejection of SPE. SPE still has important (although limited) room for operation. Furthermore, I do not think that the conception of “democratic equality” captures the basic sufficientarian element of PC properly. Of course, to secure the capability to function as equals (in the relevant senses for this conception), people must have available what the sufficientarian distribution described here demands (and more). However, it is important to have a separate basic sufficientarian principle for two reasons. The first is that part of the value of meeting basic needs is independent from the contribution this makes to rendering status equality possible.<sup>26</sup> The point of not letting people starve is not only the indirect one of securing that they are able to vote or participate in public deliberation. Furthermore, we can encounter (hypothetical or real) scenarios in which trade-offs between basic

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and also to relax, on condition that she contributes, appropriately to her capacity, to the flourishing and relaxing of others” (pp. 4-5).

<sup>24</sup> As Kymlicka (2006) argues, this mindfulness could be seen as part of the ethos that should animate an egalitarian society. We should “look critically at the claims of resources we make, and ... ask ourselves whether we are trying to gain economic privileges from our undeserved natural talents, and/or to externalize the cost of our choices to others” (Ibid., 23). This scrutiny could be a self-directed requirement, and thus perhaps circumvent the common criticisms that luck egalitarianism demands charging institutions with the infeasible or intrusive task of tracking the choice / circumstance distinction in the condition of contributors and recipients of distributive policies, and that it leads to humiliating treatment of the “deserving poor” or the “negligent” through speech acts evaluating differences in their natural endowments and their life choices (Ibid., 20-22, 23-25, 31).

<sup>25</sup> Social and political status equality could be presented as a separate principle of equality alongside SPE. I think that this would be a good idea. The reason why I present status egalitarian considerations under the heading of PC in this paper is that I am proceeding through an internal discussion of Cohen’s framework. But I think that there are many forms of equality that are worth endorsing, both intrinsically and instrumentally. For an illuminating articulation of several egalitarian principles, including status equality, see White (2007, ch.1).

<sup>26</sup> This point is also made in Wolff (2010, 349). Wolff also calls for a pluralistic approach to justice (involving, for example, the balancing of considerations of fairness and respect).

sufficientarian and other demands (including status-based ones) occur, and we cannot make sense of them unless we distinguish the former from the latter.

### PC, Freedom and Coercion

A possible worry about PC is that it may unduly constrain people's room for personal choices. As Cohen acknowledges, socialists care about securing for everybody some such room (pp. 22-4, 47-8, 76). One can, in fact, say that securing some amount of personal freedom is a matter of justice. But of course there is the question of how much room we are entitled to. Not being strict libertarians, most socialists do not think there is an absolute entitlement. Redistribution along SPE certainly constrains people's choices in significant, but justifiable, ways. What about PC? Does it depress people's personal liberty in unjustifiable ways?

This question becomes appropriately salient once we see PC as a stringent demand of justice, as one of the typical features of justice is that it delimits the boundaries of individuals' liberty. (If we did not see PC as a stringent demand of justice, then it would be harder to understand how it could ever limit liberty.) To answer this concern we can do two things. The first is to consider the implementation of PC through non-coercive mechanisms, and the second is to consider it in terms of coercive mechanisms. In both cases I assume, with Cohen and with most socialists, that personal freedom is a ground of justice, but also one whose prescriptive content and weight depends on overall judgments considering other grounds.<sup>27</sup>

Imagine first that the transfers implementing PC could be secured without coercion. We might imagine that the state could be, as Engels, following Saint-Simon once thought it would be, reduced to the "administration of things, not of persons." Or, less unrealistically, we could imagine that some of the state's distributive tasks are, while others are not, implemented coercively. Either way, let us imagine that we have institutions implementing PC non-coercively. These institutions would provide the logistics for the transfers, but it would be up to the individual choice of citizens to voluntarily donate funds for such allocation to take place. One can say that there is here a moral limitation of personal choice even if there is no coercion backing it. Even if nobody may coerce Anne (who is quite rich) to give away part of her income to support sufficientarian or status based transfers for the benefit of Benjamin (who is quite poor), it might still make sense to say that Anne is not entitled to all of her income when she could give away part of it to favor Benjamin without incurring unreasonable sacrifice. Of course

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<sup>27</sup> This assumption is of course the target of libertarian challenges to redistributive theories. I will not address these important challenges here. See Narveson (1988), and Nozick (1974). For Cohen's systematic response to libertarianism, see Cohen (1995). I discuss some libertarian arguments in Gilbert (2006) and (2010).

we can assume, as many do, that injustice and liability to coercion co-vary, and that this co-variation is essential to what justice is. But some, including Cohen, do not accept this assumption. As we saw (in the fourth section) the site of justice can be seen as wider than the set of coercive institutions of a society. If this view is correct, then it would indeed make sense to say that transfers based on PC can involve just limitations of the room for personal choice (for example regarding the use of income) even if no coercion is marshaled.<sup>28</sup>

Imagine now (more realistically) that transfers implementing PC are backed by coercive institutional mechanisms, such as taxation. Presumably, the implementation of SPE can, and normally would, be implemented (at least partially) through coercive institutional mechanisms of this kind. Transfers implementing PC might also proceed in this way. Would this be acceptable given the additional costs regarding personal freedom? This case would be different from the one considered in the previous paragraph because the limitation on freedom would not only constrain the range of goods an agent is entitled to use without an obligation to cater for community oriented demands. In addition, the liability to coercion limits the ability of the agent to decide whether they act in accordance with their community-based obligations without facing interference from others.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> It is of course possible to say that no freedom is limited here, as it is up to the agents under moral obligations to decide whether they discharge them. But my concern here is not freedom of choice in this general sense, but the extent of people's prerogative to act as they want without having to cater for others' demands. In *Rescuing Justice and Equality* Cohen makes the first point (about non-coercive obligations not limiting freedom of choice) (Cohen 2008, 192, 198-9). But he also acknowledges the possibility of conflict between a personal prerogative and particularly demanding pictures of people's obligations. There is, according to Cohen, a "legitimate personal prerogative" which "grants each person the right to be something other than an engine for the welfare of other people: we are not nothing but slaves to social justice" (Cohen 2008, 10; see also 220). This prerogative is not, however, absolute. Each agent, in their practical deliberations, must seek to ascertain its legitimate boundaries by weighing it against other appropriate demands of justice that apply to the circumstances under consideration (Cohen 2008, 220).

<sup>29</sup> To see this difference, consider a parallel example involving two cases.

Case 1: A and B are two survivors of a shipwreck. They are at sea on board two lifeboats. Before leaving the sinking mother ship, they had to choose among the available lifeboats. A and B could both choose from two lifeboats, one being clearly better than the other. A took a longer time to choose than B, thinking that perhaps the mother ship would not sink after all. As a result, A ended up boarding the defective lifeboat. Now A's lifeboat is sinking. A will die unless rescued by B, who is nearby, on board an excellent lifeboat that could hold both A and B (and some others) without significant risks. Is B morally entitled to refrain from rescuing A?

Case 2: The same as Case 1, but add now a third survivor, C, who is on the lifeboat with B. C, unlike B, cannot swim, and thus cannot jump into the water and rescue A. But C is physically stronger than B, and can credibly threaten B by saying that they will break B's arm if B refuses to rescue A. Is it morally acceptable for C to coerce B to rescue A in this way if B would not do it voluntarily?



A justification of this further limitation of freedom could be based on several considerations. First, we can compare the relative moral weight of (a) the two losses of freedom mentioned in the previous paragraph and (b) the loss in terms of secure survival and status that would accrue to some if PC is not implemented. If the implementation of PC does not involve unreasonable sacrifices, and there is still plenty of room for people to pursue personal projects without interference from others, then it seems clear that (b) outweighs (a). Of course, it would be better if (a) did not include the threat of coercion. But if such a threat is crucial to prevent free-riding or to provide assurance to those who want to help without being “suckers,” then the additional loss may, all things considered, be justified.<sup>30</sup>

An additional point concerns the importance of political self-determination, a crucial aspect of the ideal of freedom besides personal liberty. In a socialist society, redistributive mechanisms would be controlled by those affected by them through procedures of political self-determination. Socialists normally take equality of opportunity for political influence to be amongst their core demands.<sup>31</sup> Political self-determination is relevant to our discussion in several ways. First, it provides (as we saw when arguing for PC-based limitations of the inequalities compatible with SPE) one of the grounds for PC-based redistribution. Avoiding extreme inequalities is a precondition for securing the fair value of political liberty.

Second, political liberty would be an important tool for those affected by coercive public institutions to keep them in check. This would include the ability to challenge

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<sup>30</sup> Of course, not all forms of coercion would be acceptable. A Stalinist conscription of forced labor, for example, would likely be unacceptable. Here I have in mind fairly mild coercive mechanisms such as taxation. See Cohen (2008, 221-222) on why this form of coercion is not very troublesome and how it might be better than the alternatives in securing as much overall freedom as we can get. And securing as much overall freedom as we can get is indeed the relevant aim. It is no decisive objection to socialism to show that freedom would be limited in it in some way if any feasible alternative would limit freedom even more. Arguably, once we understand “freedom” in its multiple senses (including capability to function in valuable ways, avoid undue interference, and avoid domination) then we can see that capitalism, with its highly anti-community and anti-equality tendencies, is in fact quite likely to render people less free than a non-authoritarian socialism. For illuminating discussion of how capitalism hampers the “real freedom” of workers and the relatively poor (to pursue their life plans, to bargain in the market, to be self-directing at the workplace, and to affect the shape of the political process), see Wright (2010: 50-52, 81-84) and Van Parijs (1995, ch.1).

<sup>31</sup> Cohen refers to democracy as part of the socialist ideal in Cohen (1995: 253, 261). See also, for example, John Roemer’s account of socialism in terms of three demands of equality of opportunity for (a) self-realization and welfare, (b) political influence, and (c) social status (Roemer 1994, 11-15). Wright (2010: 12-20) construes socialism as being animated by egalitarian principles of “social justice” and “political justice” (both involve status considerations, and the latter emphasizes democratic empowerment). For an argument justifying economic socialist redistribution as a precondition for the feasibility of a robust, deliberative form of democracy, see Joshua Cohen (1989). A deliberative form of democracy should be appealing to someone committed to Cohen’s idea of “justificatory community” (see note 5 above).

potential overreach in the limitation of personal freedom, which is an inherent risk of any political system.

Finally, coercive institutional structures can be not just potential threats to personal freedom but also their protectors and enablers, and thus normally citizens have reason to favor their presence. The issue is how they can be framed in such a way that the multiple concerns of justice are catered for in justifiable ways. To find the optimal balance, political liberty is again desirable. Besides the considerations of status and of accountability (indicated above), political liberty has the epistemic significance of affording those affected by political decisions the opportunity to participate in the discovery of the appropriate balancing of considerations that should ground them. In this respect, one can see concerns about community and personal freedom as being among the substantive guidelines framing the public deliberation of politically free agents.

These three considerations certainly do not eliminate the tension between individual liberty and political self-determination.<sup>32</sup> But it is hard to imagine how this tension could be eliminated. The relevant task is, rather, to find an appropriate balance. I do not think there is any ready and compelling algorithm to dissolve it. And the same applies, I think, to tensions involving other fundamental grounds of justice. But what makes the socialist ideal (and Cohen's extraordinary contribution, with perhaps some amendments suggested here) so inspiring is that it keeps all of their components (the various concerns for freedom, community, and also equality) firmly in play.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The danger is for the right to political self-determination to become the right of everyone to monitor the personal life of each. The sphere of genuine personal choice might shrink under the pressure of having to behave in ways that others would approve of. The risk is that of having a "free society" that is not a "society of free people" (Van Parijs 1995, 15-17), but rather one where "the 'self-government' spoken of is not the government of each by himself, but of each by all the rest" (Mill 1991, 8). Socialists are, but should be more, alive to this risk. Thus, for example, when Wright (2010, 12) states his principle of "political justice," which calls for "*all people [...to] have broadly equal access to the necessary means to participate meaningfully in decisions about things that would affect their lives*" he perspicuously includes reference to both "*the freedom of individuals to make choices that affect their own lives as separate persons*" and "*their capacity to participate in collective decisions which affect their lives as members of a broader community.*" However, his subsequent discussion of this principle's content and implications does not seem to me to address the possibility of tension between its two components. The boundaries between the two spheres assumed in the principle is always a subject of difficult negotiation. (Further discussion is also needed to address the possible tensions between the principle of "political justice" and the principle of "social justice" calling for "*broadly equal access to the necessary material and social means to live flourishing lives.*" Although the implementation of each principle is normally likely to contribute to the implementation of the other, conflicts could arise here as well. Just as the democratic will of the people may sometimes fail to protect personal freedom, it may also fail to select optimal opportunity sets for flourishing lives.)

<sup>33</sup> For helpful comments I thank the referees for *Socialist Studies*, Roberto Gargarella, Anca Gheaus, Carol Gould, James Johnson, Holly Lawford-Smith, William Clare Roberts, Adam Swift, Patrick Tomlin, Daniel Weinstock, Jurgen De Wispelaere, Lea Ypi, and audiences at Columbia University, McGill University, the

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