

What Egalitarianism Requires: An Interview with John E. Roemer

JOHN E. ROEMER (Washington, 1945) is the Elizabeth S. and A. Varick Stout Professor of Political Science and Economics at Yale University, where he has taught since 2000. Before joining Yale, he had taught at the University of California, Davis, since 1974. He is also a Fellow of the Econometric Society, and has been a Fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Russell Sage Foundation. Roemer completed his undergraduate studies in mathematics at Harvard in 1966, and his graduate studies in economics at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1974.

Roemer's work spans the domains of economics, philosophy, and political science, and, most often, applies the tools of general equilibrium and game theory to problems of political economy and distributive justice—problems often stemming from the discussions among political philosophers in the second half of the twentieth century. Roemer is one of the founders of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of analytical Marxism, particularly in economics, and a member of the September Group—together with Gerald A. Cohen and Jon Elster, among others—since its beginnings in the early 1980s. Roemer is most known for his pioneering work on various types of exploitation, including capitalist and Marxian exploitation (for example, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, 1982a), for his extensive writings on Marxian economics and philosophy (for example, *Analytical Foundations of Marxian Economic Theory*, 1981, and *Free to Lose: An Introduction to Marxist Economic Philosophy*, 1988a), for his numerous writings on socialism (for example, *A Future for Socialism*, 1994b), and for his work on the concept and measurement of equality of opportunity (for example, *Equality of Opportunity*, 1998a).

The *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics* (EJPE) interviewed Roemer on the occasion of his latest book, *How We Cooperate: A Theory of Kantian Optimization* (2019a), to which the EJPE is devoting the present special issue. The interview covers Roemer's intellectual biography

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Most footnotes throughout the interview are editorial annotations directing readers to the relevant literature discussed in the text. Footnotes by the author, John E. Roemer, are indicated by the phrase 'Author's Note'.

(section I); his extensive writings on exploitation, egalitarianism (section II), socialism, bargaining, and justice (section III); his latest work on Kantian optimization, his vision for the future of socialism (section IV); and, finally, his methodological commitments and the value of interdisciplinarity (section V).

I. INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY

EJPE: Professor Roemer, during your childhood years, your family lived in Switzerland and Canada, before your parents—Ruth and Milton Roemer—returned to Cornell and then UCLA. Can you tell us a bit about the people and events that were formative for you during the time before you entered university?

JOHN E. ROEMER: In October 1948, my father received a letter from the Board of Inquiry on Employee Loyalty of the US Federal Security Agency (FSA), interrogating him about his association with people and organizations associated with the US Communist Party. He was at the time still a member of the US Public Health Service, a unit of the Army, that he had joined, as a physician, during World War II. This letter was the first in an intensive correspondence between the FSA and my father about his professional and political activities, in which my father took the position that, since he had joined the Public Health Service, he had had no contact with the Communist Party. In April 1949, he received a letter from the FSA clearing him of suspicion of disloyalty to the United States. However, the Agency re-opened his case in 1950, at which time he was an assistant professor at Yale University, on leave or loan from the Public Health Service. At this point, he was advised by his lawyer that he would probably be found to be disloyal, and would be discharged from the Public Health Service and fired from Yale, and it would be prudent for him to leave the country. He received an offer from the World Health Organization (WHO), and our family moved to Geneva later that year.

About a year later, the US State Department retracted my parents' passports, because they were considered to be disloyal citizens, and the WHO was obliged to fire him, although they gave him a year's grace in order to find another job. At this time, there was a social-democratic government in Saskatchewan, Canada, led by a Scottish socialist named Tommy Douglas. The provincial government offered him a job to work on designing a provincial health insurance system, which eventually became the first single-payer health insurance system in North America. We lived

in Regina, Saskatchewan for three years, until the peak of McCarthyism in the United States had passed. At that point my father accepted an offer from Cornell University, and the family moved to Ithaca, New York.

I relate this history because it was similar to the political persecution that many left-wing Americans were subjected to in the early 1950s. Of course, my parents' troubles were at the center of the discussions in the household. Certainly, the most important influence on me until I left home for university was my parents. The culture of the household was deeply political. Even though my parents were not members of the US Communist Party since some time in the 1940s, they remained staunch socialists, and supporters of the Soviet Union, even after the revelations by Khrushchev about Stalin's crimes at the twentieth Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) party congress in 1956. My father would defend Stalin until sometime in the 1990s. My mother was somewhat less political, but she was also pro-Soviet until late in her life, as were the two grandparents whom I knew.

So, since my earliest memories, I have been a socialist. I remember as a child thinking the good guys were the workers, the Democrats, and the Brooklyn Dodgers, and the bad guys were the bosses, the Republicans, and the New York Yankees. (There was pretty strong class allegiance to the Dodgers and Yankees as I have described.)

I also had good friends in high school, both girls and boys. Only one of these friendships was largely based on a political bond—her parents were also close to the Communist Party. The bond in the other friendships was based on love of mathematics. One of these high school buddies was Roger Howe, who remains a friend until today, and a collaborator and teacher in my professional work. Roger is a superb mathematician, who has retired after many years teaching at Yale University where, by some coincidence, I have also ended up.

You mention your friendship and collaboration with the mathematician Roger Howe. The two of you wrote a 1981 paper together, "Rawlsian Justice as the Core of a Game", which was one of the first attempts at applying game theory so rigorously to questions of justice.¹ This was

¹ Howe and Roemer (1981) model the original position as a game with specified withdrawal payoffs and argue that the difference principle is in the core of a game in which no coalition will withdraw after the veil of ignorance is lifted, unless it can guarantee every one of its members a better payoff in a new lottery. Apart from being one of the first attempts at applying game theory to questions of justice, this result is of particular interest for two reasons. First, it shows that an assumption about individuals being

before Ken Binmore's two-volume Game Theory and the Social Contract and your own Theories of Distributive Justice, both published in the 1990s.² How did the joint work on this paper come about? And why have you not published any other manuscripts together?

I don't recall how Roger and I came to collaborate on the Rawls paper: I must have initiated discussing it with him. Although that is the only paper on which we collaborated officially, Roger has made key contributions to the mathematics in a number of my papers. See, for instance, the lead footnote in my article "Equality of Resources Implies Equality of Welfare" (1986a). Roger was responsible for a theorem in convex analysis that he stated and proved at my request, which was the key to the main result of that paper. You will find an acknowledgment to Roger in quite a few of my papers and books.

As you have already related to us so vividly, you come from a socialist household, and your parents were active health services researchers. What kind of conversations did the family have when you were all together?

My parents were avid hosts: my mother organized several large dinner parties a month, while she also raised her children and was a full-time faculty member at UCLA, from 1962 on. There were always academic friends and former students passing through Los Angeles, and each visitor provided an excuse for a dinner party. At the cocktail hour before dinner, my father would invariably begin a political discussion, which often continued through dinner. These events exposed me not only to a political worldview, but introduced me to left-wing public-health professionals from around the world. When later I began travelling abroad as a young adult, I would eagerly look up my parents' friends in the cities that I visited, and would invariably be shown a good time, with lessons about the political history of the country since the war.

What kind of books and authors were you reading as a child? Were you also reading philosophical works at that time?

moved by a "special psychology" that makes them "peculiarly averse to uncertainty" (Rawls 2001, 107)—rather than rational self-interest—was implicit in the argument for the difference principle. This is because Howe and Roemer show that a risk-neutral game has no core, but the difference principle is in the core of an extremely risk-averse game. Second, the result is also of import for the question of stability, which was a central concern for Rawls. For Rawls' own discussion of the implications of Howe and Roemer's results for his theory, see Rawls (2001, 109–110).

² See Binmore (1994, 1998), and Roemer (1996), respectively.

I'm afraid I did not read much as a child: the great literature that I read was only that which was assigned in high school. My extra-curricular activity involved either math or music.

You were interested in socialism from an early age and yet you have said in the past that up to your first job at UC Davis, you had never read Marxian economics.³ When did you start reading Marxian economics—and theory more broadly—and which books and authors were formative for you in that respect?

Although my identity was socialist from early on, I did not become politically active until graduate school. I graduated from Harvard in 1966, having taken as many math courses as was permitted. I took one freshman philosophy course, one history course, one economics course, and one music theory course. I think that was the sum of my general education. I also took only one physics course: unlike most good mathematicians, I did not have an aptitude for physics. I have since regretted the narrow focus on mathematics that I had during those years.

I enrolled in the PhD program in mathematics at the University of California, Berkeley, with Roger Howe. We had also gone together to Harvard, where we both majored in math. I chose Berkeley not only for its great math department, but also because the left-wing student movement was so active there. Arriving in Berkeley, I finally became deeply involved in left-wing politics. At this point, I started reading Marx, although largely his political pamphlets, as well as those of Lenin and Mao. I do not think I read *Capital* until 1974. There were no courses in Marxian economics at Berkeley at that time, and if there was one at Harvard, which is possible, I was not interested in it when I was an undergraduate.

You have mentioned your interest in music a couple of times and that is interesting because literature is normally much more dominant in the discussions taking place at the intersection of philosophy and economics. Can you tell us a bit more about the kind of music that you were and are listening to? Also, did you ever think about the relation between mathematics and music, and was that a source of inspiration in some way?

I took clarinet lessons as a child, and participation in the concert band was an important activity for me in high school. There was a piano in our house, and I started picking out jazz as a pre-teen. My musical heroes

³ See Roemer's interview with Maya Adereth and Jerome Hodges (2019).

were Duke Ellington, Oscar Peterson, and Erroll Garner. By the end of high school, I played jazz and blues piano, by ear, quite well. I never took piano lessons; my style was heavily influenced by Erroll Garner. He is much easier to imitate than Oscar Peterson—Garner had no classical education in piano, whereas Peterson did, and so had much more accomplished technique, which I could not hope to copy. I still play occasionally, although my musical ideas have not developed much since the age of twenty. It is said there is a link between math and music, although I don't see it in my own case. My musical intuition seems quite different from my mathematical intuition. The only attribute both intuitions share, it seems, is their requiring thousands of hours of doodling around to develop.

As you said, you obtained your undergraduate degree in mathematics from Harvard in 1966. What did you write your thesis on, and did you use it in your later studies and work?

My senior thesis at Harvard was on abelian groups. I never worked in that area again. The mathematics that I have used is applied analysis.

You then moved to Berkeley for your graduate studies in mathematics but quickly changed your major to economics. You have explained this change with your political activism around the anti-Vietnam War movement at the time. This was also the time, particularly in the tumult of 1968, when you got arrested together with a group of students who occupied the university administration building.⁴ Have your views on political activism changed? Did you, and do you still, remain politically active after 1968, and if yes—how?

When I was suspended from Berkeley in 1968, I lost my draft deferment. I took a job teaching math in a virtually all-black junior high school in San Francisco; with this, I received another deferment from the draft, for teaching in an inner-city school which was considered to be a kind of national service. I was politically active in a left-wing caucus in the teachers' union. In 1973, I was re-admitted to Berkeley, and wrote my PhD dissertation in economics.

My views on activism have not changed, although my left-wing activity has been largely restricted to my writing since 1976, as well as to participating in the occasional mass demonstration.

⁴ See Adereth and Hodges (2019) for more details on this episode.

The title of your PhD dissertation at Berkeley was “U.S.-Japanese Competition in International Markets: A Study of the Trade-Investment Cycle in Modern Capitalism”. Who was your supervisor, and how did you decide to work on this topic?

I chose the topic of US-Japanese competition because the gauchiste party to which Natasha and I belonged in Berkeley thought that, with the end of the Vietnam War, the major conflict in the world would be inter-imperialist rivalry between the US and Japan. Unfortunately, I knew very little about international trade and finance, and my dissertation was journalistic rather than academic. My adviser was a left-wing economic historian, Richard Roehl. I received my degree, despite the rather unsatisfactory dissertation, due to the support of Benjamin Ward, an iconoclastic professor at Berkeley, who advocated for me because I was not treading the usual professional path. Ward was the author of *The Ideal Worlds of Economics: Liberal, Radical, and Conservative Economic World Views* (1979).

What were the kind of topics that your fellow PhD students at Berkeley were working on at the time? Did any of your colleagues have a particular influence on your move away from international trade?

I did not have much contact with my fellow students at Berkeley, because when I was taking classes, in 1966–1968, I was spending all my extra time in campus political work. And then there was a five-year hiatus before I returned to Berkeley to write the dissertation. I took a job in 1974 as an assistant professor at the University of California at Davis. In the summer of 1975, I read *Marx’s Economics* by Michio Morishima (1973), a Japanese mathematical Marxist economist. I was excited by this book, for Morishima was using the tools I had learned in mathematical economics to study Marxist questions: exploitation, the labor theory of value, the transformation problem. Two micro-economic theorists on the Davis faculty, Ross Starr and Richard Cornwall, suggested I teach a course on Morishima’s book. This began my work in mathematical Marxian economics, the culmination of which was my book *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (1982a). I am grateful to my Davis colleagues who set me on the path of Marxian economics.

We have reached the end of the 1970s and the start of the 1980s—an important point in time that saw the formation of the ‘September Group’. The Group was formed by Jon Elster and Gerald A. Cohen in 1979 and you joined it the following year. Can you tell us more about

the organisation of the meetings and the general environment? Did you follow a typical seminar format, with a presentation followed by a discussion, or did you pre-circulate the relevant texts and devote the meetings only to discussions?

While I was working on the book I just referred to, I read G. A. Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* ([1978] 2001) and Jon Elster's *Logic and Society: Contradictions and Possible Worlds* (1978). I learned I was not alone: here were two young academic Marxists, using the latest tools in analytical philosophy and social science to study Marxian questions. I sent a few chapters of the draft of my *General Theory* to Cohen, who replied with a lengthy letter. He invited me to the next meeting of a group that he and Elster had convened in Paris the year before, of similarly inclined young Marxist academics (all male). The first year I attended the September Group was 1980 or 1981. The current name of the group was adopted later: in the early years, we referred to ourselves as the NBSMG (No-BullShit Marxist Group).

The annual meetings lasted two or three days, with ten to fifteen in attendance. We followed the usual format of paper presentations, all read before the meeting, with discussants.

Was the name 'No-Bullshit Marxist Group' proposed by Cohen? He has a colourful section in the 2000 introduction to his *Karl Marx's Theory of History* where he clarifies what he calls his practice of "non-bullshit Marxism" (Cohen [1978] 2001, xxv-xxviii).

I don't recall who came up with the handle. Both Jerry and I were pretty profane, and it could have been either of us. I don't think it was Jon Elster—it was not his style. There was, however, a slight difference: Jerry always said *non-bullshit* Marxism and I said *no-bullshit*—the latter must be more of an Americanism.

You mentioned the importance of Michio Morishima's Marx's Economics to your initiation in Marxian economics. At the time when the September Group was formed, Morishima was teaching at the London School of Economics as the Sir John Hicks Professor—a position he held from 1970 until 1989. Did you ever meet him? And why was he never a member of the Group?

None of us knew Morishima. Furthermore, he did not have any obvious leftist sympathies. Much of the work that Morishima made famous was developed by other Japanese Marxist economists such as Nobuo Okishio

(1927–2003). Unfortunately, I never met Okishio, who, I believe, was more the pioneer of mathematical Marxian economics in Japan than Morishima.

Can you tell us more about the kind of topics—and papers—that were discussed at the beginning? For example, Cohen’s own account of the pre-history of the Group says that the first two meetings (in 1979 and 1980) were on exploitation.⁵ What kind of work on exploitation was being discussed at the time—normative, conceptual? How did the topics change over the years?

In 1986, I edited the book *Analytical Marxism*, which published a dozen or so papers from the September Group.⁶ The topics were quite broad-ranging. Members included philosophers, economists, sociologists, historians, and political scientists. The common task was to re-state Marxian questions in a modern way, and to study them using the tools of analytical social science and philosophy. The school of ‘analytical Marxism’ was quite influential in the 1980s: it was attacked from the left by traditional Marxists, who believed that using these ‘bourgeois’ tools of analysis would surely infect our conclusions. In reply, we called these critics bible-thumpers. The preface of Cohen’s 1978 book on historical materialism contains a lovely comment about bible-thumping (though not using that terminology).⁷

In a recent interview, you said that the “group continues to meet every year, though most of us no longer identify as Marxists” (Adereth and Hodges 2019). Why is that? Why did you cease to identify as a Marxist? Some people left the group in the early 1990s because they felt we had accomplished what we had set out to do—to find what part of Marxism stood the stress test of analysis with modern tools. Others, like myself, still valued the meetings, although the topics tended to diverge quite a bit, as the members became older. I tend not to call myself a Marxist anymore because I do not credit many of the ideas that Marx believed were at the center of his view: the labor theory of value, the falling rate of profit, and the claim that dialectical materialism is a special kind of logic.

In this period, from 1980 on, G. A. Cohen and Jon Elster were my closest intellectual comrades outside of economics. Cohen died suddenly at

⁵ See Cohen ([1978] 2001, xviii–xix).

⁶ See Roemer (1986c).

⁷ See Cohen ([1978] 2001, ix).

age 68 in 2009. To this day, I remain close to Jon Elster, both intellectually and personally.

In 2000, you became the Elizabeth S. and A. Varick Stout Professor of Political Science and Economics at Yale—a position you hold to this day. Can you tell us something more about the namesakes of the professorship, and what made you decide to move to, and stay at, Yale?

I'm afraid I don't know anything about the Stouts, who endowed the chair I hold. I have never been asked to pursue an intellectual agenda associated with the chair—it comes with no strings attached. My wife Natasha and I decided to try to move to New York from California, after 26 years at UC Davis, because we loved the city after spending a year here in 1998–1999. Luckily, I was offered the Yale position, so that this became a reality. Although I had a wonderful academic environment at Davis, Yale is something special, and we've had no thought of moving again.

II. Exploitation and Egalitarianism

Your views on exploitation have changed considerably over the years. Let us start by asking: when and why did you become interested in exploitation?

As I said, I considered myself a Marxist from early adolescence. However, I never took any left-wing, let alone Marxist, courses as an undergraduate. I was certainly familiar with Marx's theory that exploitation of labor was the key to understanding capitalism. As I related, in the summer of 1975, after my first year of teaching at Davis, I read Morishima's book *Marx's Economics*, published in 1973, in order to prepare a seminar I was planning to teach on the topic. This was my first exposure to mathematical Marxism, and I was enthusiastic. Morishima (and again, I should say, the school of Japanese mathematical Marxists) provided rigorous definitions of embodied labor time and exploitation, and proved theorems. The main theorem Morishima called the Fundamental Marxian Theorem, which states that, in a market economy, profits of firms are positive if and only if workers are exploited.⁸ This marked the beginning of my professional interest in exploitation.

⁸ The Fundamental Marxian Theorem is credited as the Morishima–Seton–Okishio theorem after the contributions of Michio Morishima and Frances Seton (1961), and Nobuo Okishio (1963). See Morishima's discussion of the theorem in Part II of his book (1973, 53ff.).

You are known for developing two conceptions of exploitation—one based on the ‘surplus value’ approach, and the other based on the ‘property relations’ approach. Can you explain intuitively what the differences between these two forms of exploitation are and why you decided to abandoned the ‘surplus value’ conception in favour of the ‘property relations’ conception?

The surplus-value definition says this: a worker is exploited if the embodied labor time in the goods that he can purchase with his/her wage income is less than the labor he/she expended in production to earn those wages. More generally, a producer’s income can come from three sources: wage labor, profits, or work done by a producer on his own capital. A producer is exploited if the amount of consumer goods she can purchase with her income embodies less labor than she expended in production, whether as a wage worker, or a petty-bourgeois, working up her own capital. A producer is an exploiter if his income purchases goods embodying more labor than he expended in production.

In my models, individuals (producers) choose, constrained by their wealth, whether to sell their labor power, to expend their labor on their own capital, or to hire others to work on their capital. The combination of these three activities determines a producer’s *class position*. What I proved was that each producer would end up either being exploited, or being an exploiter, or being neither exploited nor exploiting, and one’s exploitation status (defined by the surplus-value definition), as determined by preferences and the value of one’s capital, corresponded in a clear way to one’s class position. Proletarians, who owned no capital, had no choice but to sell their labor power to others. If a person has a lot of capital, she can optimize by not working at all and only hiring others. It turns out there are five *class positions*, which may be associated with being a landlord, a rich peasant, a middle peasant, a semi-agricultural proletarian, or a landless laborer. The *class-exploitation correspondence principle* says that if there are positive profits in a capitalist economy, then any producer who must sell labor to solve his optimization problem is exploited and any producer who must hire labor to optimize is an exploiter. This is a theorem: one proves the relationship between class membership and exploitation status as a consequence of the definitions.⁹ We prove from axioms that the classical Marxist relationship between working for others and being exploited must hold—it is not simply a description of

⁹ See Roemer (1982a, 78–82, 129–132) for statements, proofs, and explanations of this result in economies with and without capital accumulation.

reality or a definition. This provides *microfoundations of class membership* from the optimization behavior of individuals.

But is this exploitation immoral or unethical? We cannot say, until we know *how it came to be* that some people begin owning capital and others do not. Marx established, in his researches in the British Museum, that the ‘primitive accumulation of capital’ did not emerge through honest work, but through plunder, enclosure of the peasant commons, regal gifts of land to feudal lords, and so on. Thereby Marx established—assuming his history is correct—that ownership of capital is morally tainted, and *that’s* what makes exploitation a bad thing: exploitation of some by others is a manifestation of differential ownership of capital whose genesis is immoral.

Now this history of primitive accumulation suggests that we contemplate an alternative distribution of land and capital, an equal one. We can propose another definition of exploitation that does not mention surplus labor or value at all. We can ask of the equilibrium in a capitalist economy: suppose the workers were to withdraw from the economy, taking with them *their per capita share* of the capital stock. Would they be better off or worse off than in the capitalist equilibrium? More generally, we can define a group or coalition of producers as *exploited* if, were they to withdraw from the present situation with their per capita share of the capital stock, their lot would improve, and a group or coalition is *exploiting* if, were they to withdraw with their per capita share of the capital stock, they would be worse off. We don’t refer to labor embodied in goods at all. This is the *property-relations* definition of exploitation.

It turns out that one can show that (under certain conditions) the property-relations definition and the surplus-value definition are equivalent in the sense that under both definitions, the group of exploited producers is the same and the group of exploiters is the same.¹⁰ The virtue of the property-relations approach is that it builds in the ethical condemnation of capitalism: for conceptualizing the counterfactual to the capitalist equilibrium as an alternative where each coalition gets to keep its per capita share of the capital stock (and of course its own labor power) is salient because, absent the plunder of primitive accumulation (according to Marx), the equal-per-capita distribution of capital is what justice would require. Or at least this is one obvious alternative to capitalism with unequal ownership of the capital stock (means of production).

¹⁰ See Roemer (1982a, 194–237, and particularly, for a summary, 233–237).

These are questions that we will come back to in more detail later, but just to clarify: at least in the model of an economy with capital accumulation, it seems that assuming that the equal-per-capita distribution is the right counterfactual distribution also assumes that justice requires the complete elimination of material bequests—though non-material inheritance might not be entirely problematic, as you have argued in relation to intergenerational mobility (Roemer 2004). Is this a view on the injustice of (material) wealth inheritance that you generally subscribe to?

I believe that all young adults should begin their productive years with the same amount of wealth. This implies that the inheritance of wealth, and *in vivos* transfers to the young, must be sharply constrained. If the educational system has succeeded in eliminating inequality of opportunity, and people make different career choices, then differential wealth will emerge during adult lifetimes, and I believe those differences are consistent with justice, as long as there is sufficient income and wealth taxation to prevent income differences from becoming too extreme—so extreme as to threaten solidarity. As I said, Marx’s condemnation of the distribution of capital was based on the history of ‘primitive accumulation’ that he presented. If wealth accumulation is a result of freely chosen labor with equal-opportunity background conditions, I do not believe modest wealth differences are unjust.

Allow us to briefly go back to the ‘surplus value’ conception of exploitation. Your formal definition of this form of exploitation is based on transferable-utility (TU) cooperative games and in the TU framework, as you say, “there are no considerations of incentives and strategy within the [exploiting and exploited] coalition” (Roemer 1994a, 19), where coalitions here stand for the relevant (exploiting and exploited) classes. Was this an intentional or a pragmatic choice? Did you consider defining this form of exploitation in a non-transferable utility (NTU) framework, which would have allowed modeling not just inter-class but also intra-class conflict? More generally as well, should socialists be interested in intra-class conflict?

You are getting technical here, talking about TU and NTU games. In fact, one can show there is intra-class conflict with my approach. It can be that if the coalition of all the workers W (in the present capitalist equilibrium) were to withdraw with its per capita share of the capital, its members would be better off, but if the coalition of highly skilled workers, call it S ,

which is a proper subset of W , were to withdraw it would be even better off, and the remaining workers (in W but not in S) would be *worse* off if they were to withdraw. This shows there may be a conflict between skilled workers and unskilled workers—the latter may need the former to be better off than under capitalism.

Of course, we should be interested in intra-class conflict, to the extent that it is a real phenomenon.

We will come back to intra-class conflict towards the end of this section, but for now let us return to exploitation. There have been roughly two strands of thinking about exploitation: (1) the non-moralised approach, which understands exploitation positively or descriptively—here, for example, we have Allen Wood and his interpretation of Marxian exploitation—and (2) the moralised approach, which understands exploitation normatively—here, we have, Hillel Steiner, Jon Elster, and Robert Goodin, among others. Your first conception of exploitation based on the ‘surplus value’ approach has a domination condition and thus seems to fall in the moralised camp. However, your second conception based on the ‘property relations’ approach is purely descriptive. Have your views on the moralised versus non-moralised nature of exploitation changed? And if yes, why?

There are several problems with what you call the non-moralized approach. The first is that it turns out *any* input (say, coal or energy) can be shown to be ‘exploited’ in a capitalist economy with positive profits. That is, we can define the energy value of a commodity as the amount of energy embodied in producing it and all the inputs needed for its production. We must be able to define the energy embodied in a unit of labor power as well: this is the amount of energy the producer has to consume in order to reproduce her labor power—heating, gasoline in one’s car to get to work, and so on. Then one can show that profits are positive if and only if energy is exploited, in the sense that a unit of energy has embodied in it less than one unit of energy. (Just as: labor is exploited if the production of one unit of labor power requires consuming goods that embody less than one unit of labor.)

Well, if this is the case, then what’s special about labor power? I claim it’s because there is *no moral opprobrium* associated with the exploitation of energy, or of steel, or seed corn. The moral opprobrium associated with the exploitation of labor is that its source is the vastly unequal distribution of capital that came about through robbery, plunder, enclosure, etc.

So the surplus-value definition, I claim, has its appeal because we intuitively feel that the vastly unequal distribution of wealth (capital) is morally indefensible. And it's *not* indefensible because unequal wealth produces labor exploitation—that would be circular—but because *the source of unequal wealth is immoral takings*.

This raises the important question: what if unequal capital ownership comes about *morally*? An important question, which we will address later.

In “Should Marxists Be Interested in Exploitation?”, you concluded that “exploitation theory is a domicile that we need no longer maintain: it has provided a home for raising a vigorous family who now must move on” (Roemer 1985, 33). And, indeed, since then, your work has noticeably strayed away from issues of exploitation. Can you explain why you reached this conclusion? In your view, is there still a place for the concept of exploitation in Marxism?

I think I have explained this. The central question that Marxists should be interested in is the ethical status of the distribution of wealth. Marx believed that socialism would expunge the immorality of capitalism by prohibiting the privatization of capital. Under socialism, capital would be owned collectively by the entire coalition of producers. As we know, Marx said hardly anything about the details of how such an economy would function; his concern was to diagnose how wealth could emerge in such a concentrated form in a mode of production in which the coercion of workers no longer existed—in the sense, that is, that serfs and slaves were coerced to work. The sleight-of-hand of capitalism was to produce a highly skewed distribution of wealth and income *even though* the direct producers were free and not induced to work by the bosses' whip. Exploitation of labor, in the surplus-value sense, is a symptom of the immorality of capitalism, but it's not the source of that immorality. The source is the set of practices that leads to a highly skewed distribution of wealth in the first place.

In a series of papers following “Should Marxists Be Interested in Exploitation?” (1985), you amend a part of your ‘property relations’ definition of exploitation. More precisely, in your 1985 paper you argue that gain from the labour of others, including unequal exchange of labour, is irrelevant to a charge of exploitation. But in a later response to an example by Erik Wright, you reintroduce “gain by virtue of the labour of

others” as part of the definition of exploitation.¹¹ What accounts for this vacillation and what is your present take on it?

I stopped thinking about these puzzles years ago, because I came to believe, as I’ve explained, that exploitation is an irrelevant tangent. There isn’t much point in worrying about exactly which conception of exploitation is the best one, if the genesis of unequal wealth is what’s key to understanding why capitalism is unjust and socialism might be just, if we can figure out how it should be designed.

There are plenty of issues in deciding when the distribution of wealth/income is just that can be addressed more directly without going through the detour of exploitation. The twentieth-century contribution to this inquiry begins with the political philosophy of John Rawls.

*Let’s turn to this inquiry, then, and the debates inaugurated by the work of John Rawls. In *Egalitarian Perspectives*, you said that when you met Gerald A. Cohen for the first time in the spring of 1981, you “began to learn from him the range of questions addressed by modern political philosophy” (Roemer 1994a, 1). You had also been reading Cohen’s *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defence* while writing *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* in 1979–1980. Is it fair to say that your initiation in contemporary political philosophy was through Cohen? Did the ‘Rawlsian storm’ of the 70’s not reach you till the 80’s?*

That’s correct. I was led to see the importance of my ignorance of philosophy as I struggled to understand why Marxian exploitation, according to

¹¹ Suppose that a society is divided into two coalitions, *S* (the exploited) and its complement *S'* (the exploiting). Wright’s example is the following:

Consider the case of two agents, Rich and Poor, who are initially endowed with 3 and 1 units of capital, respectively. This distribution is unfair: suppose that the fair distribution is egalitarian. Rich wants to consume prodigiously, while Poor only wants to subsist and write poetry (a good for which there is no market). Rich works up all his capital stock, but wants to consume even more than what is thereby produced, and and [*sic*] so Poor hires Rich to work up Poor’s capital stock, paying Rich a wage and keeping enough of the product to enable him to subsist. According to the PR [‘property relations’] definition of exploitation Rich is an exploiter and Poor is exploited. But this seems intuitively wrong because although Rich gains by virtue of being unfairly rich, he does not gain by virtue of the labor of Poor. I previously wrote that Rich did exploit Poor in this example, but I now do not think so. Therefore, I would substitute, for clause (3) [of the ‘property relations’ definition of exploitation: *S'* would be worse off if *S* withdrew from society with its own assets], the following: *S' gains by virtue of the labor of S.* (Roemer 1994a, 106; emphasis in the original)

See Vrousalis (forthcoming, 6–7) for a discussion of these revisions in Roemer’s account of exploitation.

the surplus-value account, was unjust. I did not take Rawls' course as an undergraduate at Harvard—this was before he published *Theory of Justice*, but I am sure his course had a reputation that I did not learn about, because of my narrow focus on mathematics. Jerry Cohen introduced me to the egalitarian debate in the form of Ronald Dworkin's two 1981 articles in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*.¹²

Let us now turn to Robert Nozick. Cohen famously said that Nozick was the author who shook him from his “dogmatic socialist slumber” (1995, 4). The particular occasion for this was Nozick’s Wilt Chamberlain argument and Cohen’s subsequent realisation that self-ownership itself is baked into the Marxist condemnation of exploitation. You have credited Nozick as the author who exposed “Marx’s false-positive error—that some instances of (Marxist) exploitation are not unjust” (2017, 264; see also 291–292). This answers the question you asked just above: “what if unequal capital ownership comes about morally?” (141). Was this your own ‘shaking’ moment? If not, have you had such an experience?

The first article I published giving examples of just Marxian exploitation was “Should Marxists be Interested in Exploitation?” published in 1985. I must have been writing that article in 1983. I had a few years earlier (1982) published my property-relations, game-theoretic model of exploitation in *The Economic Journal* and also in my 1982 book on exploitation and class.¹³ I was working on that book in 1979–1980, so I had surely understood the problems with the surplus-value account of exploitation as a theory of injustice by then. I don't remember any 'shaking moment', but I do recall many conversations with Jerry Cohen at that time that were hugely exciting.

On Nozick, more generally, what do you think has been his broader political and cultural influence—beyond this exposure of Marx’s error?

Nozick constructed a clear argument for capitalism, based upon the premise of self-ownership. Jerry took Nozick's argument seriously, because he pointed out that self-ownership was *also* assumed by Marx, when he viewed the surplus labor that capitalism transfers from workers to capitalists as an ethically illicit transfer. There was a discussion about whether Marx really argued that the transfer was ethically illicit, but Jerry

¹² See Dworkin (1981a, 1981b).

¹³ See Roemer (1982b) for *The Economic Journal* model, and Roemer (1982a) for the book on exploitation and class.

and I believed that, despite Marx's occasional protests to the contrary, one cannot explain the depth of his condemnation of capitalist property relations without supposing that he viewed exploitation as *wrong*. Jerry and I argued that even if self-ownership were granted as a premise, Nozick's defense of capitalism did not work, because it assumed that the physical world (real property and resources) was, ethically speaking, owned by no-one before it was privately appropriated. We argued that, morally speaking, it was justifiable to view the physical world as owned in common by everyone, before pieces of it were privately appropriated. In particular, we argued against Nozick's amendment of the 'Lockean proviso', which postulated that if a piece of the natural world is unowned, it is all right for an individual to stake it out as her property, so long as she leaves others no worse off by doing so.¹⁴ Well, I guess you could say we didn't necessarily disagree with Nozick's proviso, but we said its premise was vacuous (that there are unowned parts of the natural world), because what Nozick called unowned was properly viewed as owned in common by everyone. (I won't address the question of whether we now might want to include other sentient beings as common owners...) We then argued (Jerry, verbally, and I, using mathematical analysis) that the common ownership of the natural world meant that if someone wanted to appropriate part of it to grow crops on it, or mine it, for instance, she had to bargain with the common owners of that property (everyone else). This would alter sharply the distribution of benefits/revenues from the land. Arguably, no individual would become fabulously wealthy by appropriating parts of the 'unowned' natural world.

In the light of engaging with Nozick's arguments, in the 1980s, you concluded that "the political philosophy justifying Marxism's condemnation of capitalism was a kind of resource egalitarianism" (Roemer 1994a, 2). Further, you write, "the Marxist condemnation of the injustice of capitalism is not so different from the conclusion that other apparently less radical contemporary theories of political philosophy reach, albeit in language less flamboyant than Marxism's" (1988a, 5).

We have two questions here. First, can you briefly explain why you reached this conclusion and also tell us whether you still agree with it?

¹⁴ See chapter V, paragraph 33 of Locke's "Second Treatise" ([1690] 1988, 291) for Locke's formulation of the proviso, and Nozick ([1974] 2013, 178–182) for Nozick's formulation of the proviso.

*And second, should Marxists be liberal egalitarians?¹⁵ That is, how would you respond to the following charge: while the resource egalitarianism you defend makes Marxists “more consistent egalitarians”, as Cohen put it (1990, 382), it has nevertheless left behind all that is distinctive about the original Marxist approach in at least two ways. First, the account of exploitation is now derived from a general principle of distribution (of productive assets), and not from the exchange that occurs within the wage relationship. Second, which is a related but distinct point, we have to now abandon what was the original *raison d’être* of the original Marxist exploitation argument, to wit: there is an inherent injustice in wage labour.¹⁶ As you said just above, before starting your own work on this, you were aware that “exploitation of labor was the key to understanding capitalism” (136; *emphasis added*).*

Yes, I think that Marxism advocates a kind of resource egalitarianism: we have discussed that above. Rawls is at once more radical and less radical than Marx. He is more radical because he also views the distribution of the natural talents of people as morally arbitrary, meaning that people should not be viewed as self-owners. He is less radical because he does not condemn the accumulation of wealth as such—or, at least, I and others so argue. I stated that argument above, when I said that if conditions of equal opportunity are implemented through the tax and educational systems, then moderate accumulation of wealth is ethically all right. Marx wrote approvingly of James Meade’s concept of a property-owning democracy, and I agree.

I do not believe there is an inherent injustice in wage labor. If I did believe there were, I could not advocate the use of markets under socialism. And I think that without markets, we would be—at this point, before we discover some other way of allocating resources—condemned to terrible inefficiency and poverty. In my recent work, which is the focus of this issue of your journal, I argue that markets combined with solidaristic optimization by workers and investors, produces much better results than capitalism—in terms of both efficiency and equity.

¹⁵ The question is motivated by Will Kymlicka’s discussion of Marxism in his introduction to contemporary political philosophy (see especially, chapter 5, in Kymlicka 2002). Building on Roemer’s work, Kymlicka concludes that liberal egalitarianism has the superior theory of justice because its account of the institutional requirements of justice is superior to that of Marxism which, in his view, is guilty of a kind of ‘fetishism’ about labor, stemming partly from its theory of exploitation.

¹⁶ We assume here, as analytical Marxists and others also accept, that there is an—at least implicit—normative condemnation of exploitation in Marx’s writings, whatever the truth about his more expressed aims is.

Of course, these ideas will have to be tested in real economies. We will probably discuss that below.

The success of luck egalitarianism, of the type you and Cohen have defended, depends on meeting a pragmatic, and possibly even conceptual, challenge: the disaggregation of those outcomes which result from luck—and for which a person cannot be held responsible—and those which result from choice—for which a person can be held responsible. You have proposed an ingenious solution to this problem that follows a sort of ‘fixed effects’ approach (1993): partition all relevant agents into ‘types’—such as occupation, ethnicity, gender, and the like—whose (socially chosen) characteristics can be said to result from luck. Intra-type differences in characteristics, such as effort, say, are then said to result from choice. We have three questions on this. First, do you believe that such a stark partitioning is, in fact, possible? You have proposed correcting for the fact that some choice-based characteristics are partially also luck-determined by comparing people across types that share the same rank in the type distribution rather than the same (absolute) level. But to the extent that even striving—to be in the top rank, say—is itself partly due to luck, is this binary partition really sustainable—pragmatically, and conceptually? Some might claim that the relation between choice and circumstance is akin to that between the acquisition of a practical skill, such as playing the clarinet or speaking a language, and its performance: one can’t really be said to know how to play the clarinet without playing (sufficiently) decently, but one can’t play decently without knowing how to play in the first place—the two happen at the same time.

Second, can you explain how you propose to compensate across types while preserving differences within types?¹⁷ And, as a follow up to this, you have pointed out that finding a policy that completely equalises opportunity is almost impossible, and hence that the real policy choice consists in choosing a (social) preference ranking on the available policy alternatives.¹⁸ What kind of properties do you think such a ranking should satisfy—properties that are in concordance with your socialist commitments? And if the criterion is multi-dimensional, how should a society avoid the kind of general aggregation impossibilities observed by Kenneth Arrow?

¹⁷ This second question is asked by Susan Hurley (2002).

¹⁸ See Roemer and Trannoy (2016, 1308-1312).

You have given a succinct description of my approach to equality of opportunity. But your question, I think, illustrates the different tasks of philosophy and social science. Let us look at history. The abolition of slavery comprised a huge equalization of opportunities: making it illegal for one person to own another destroyed one magnum opportunity inhibitor. It took years, even centuries, for so-called civilized society to understand what the descendants of slaves are owed for the effects of their ancestors' slavery on their own income, wealth, and welfare. When the slaves of Haiti overthrew French colonialism and slavery at the beginning of the nineteenth century, France demanded that the new country pay huge tribute to the former slave owners, on pain of a French military invasion that would otherwise be mounted, to restore Haiti to its former enslaved condition. According to Piketty (2020, 217–220), the Haitians were still paying off this tribute well into the twentieth century, which, he says, is a major reason for Haiti's impoverished condition today. The fact that the French required such tribute illustrates that they did not believe that Haitian slavery was immoral. In the twentieth century, massive improvements in opportunities for women have been brought about by the struggles of women to loosen their shackles. In the 1960s, the injustice of racial discrimination was the focus of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, led by Black Americans, which greatly improved opportunities for African Americans.

I am saying that the history of the last several centuries can be viewed as one of rectifying the terrible truncation of opportunities of certain peoples, due to certain circumstances—morally arbitrary characteristics of persons, that come to inhibit their chances of leading a fulfilling life. In the middle of the twentieth century, John Rawls provided a general argument that race and sex were only special cases of the morally arbitrary distribution of circumstances whose effects on income and welfare would be eliminated in a just society.

Of course, as you say, it will be impossible ever to eliminate completely these effects. Highly talented people will probably always lead lives that are more successful and happier than they deserve. But we proceed incrementally: we do the best we can. The Enlightenment, beginning, let us say, with the French Revolution, is still far from complete.

As for critics like Elizabeth Anderson, my reply is that the kind of democratic equality that she and I desire doesn't stand a chance of developing when income inequality is as huge as it is today—within almost all nations, and of course, internationally. My goal is to focus on building

solidaristic societies, and I think that the most important barrier to solidarity is the individualistic ethos of capitalist society where the accumulation of private wealth is the guiding force. We are still very much in the era when inequality of income and wealth is the main problem. I speak not only of poverty, but of the way capitalist society distorts human behavior and politics. For this reason, I think Thomas Piketty is the most profound social scientist in the world today, for he has revolutionized the study of how massive are the degree and effects of material inequality.

Third, endorsing this sharp partition between choice and luck opens up the accusation—made most recently by Katrina Forrester (2019, 221)—that this move concedes too much ground, and gives too much weight, to the concept of individual responsibility which is traditionally associated with the politics of the right. How would you respond to this accusation?

As biology and neuroscience develop, we learn precisely how all manner of biological and environmental circumstances affect our accomplishments. In this process, the ambit of personal responsibility is continually diminished. Behavioral problems of children can be precisely understood as reflections of the poverty of the families in which they are raised, beginning with *in utero* nutrition of the foetus. We learn how stress reduces life expectancy in predictable ways.

The concept of responsibility must be deeply encoded in our genes. Although the boundaries of responsibility differ across societies, I believe no society lacks the concept. I am a compatibilist: I believe that our actions all have a physical representation in our brains, and at the same time, that we rightly hold people responsible for some of their actions.

We correctly educate our children about the difference between right and wrong by commenting on their choices. We attempt to imprint upon their minds a conception of responsible behavior. Can we imagine being human without doing so? I believe leftists have a *deeper* understanding of responsibility than rightists: after all, we teach our children that they are to a degree responsible for others, even if those others are not family members. This is far less true of right-wing parents, is it not?

To press the last point, resource egalitarianism, of the luck-egalitarian variety you have defended, has been dubbed “harsh or paternalistic” by so-called relational egalitarians such as Elizabeth Anderson (1999, 302). It also seems to imply that you cannot wrongfully exploit someone

if their exploitable situation—say, their dire vulnerability—is their own fault. How do you respond to these objections?

Since I proposed my approach to modeling equality of opportunity, in 1993, a large empirical literature has developed in which social scientists around the world have measured the degree to which income inequality in their societies is due to inequality of opportunity.¹⁹ Before 1993, almost all measures of unequal opportunity focused upon *one circumstance*: the rank of the individual's father in the income/wealth distribution of his generation. What these studies call *intergenerational immobility* is a special case of opportunity inequality. Societies in which the individual's rank in the income distribution of *his* generation was only weakly related to the father's rank in the income distribution of his generation were ones with relatively equal opportunity. These studies, to be precise, looked at only one circumstance in explaining the child's income: his father's income rank. It turns out, using the algorithm that I propose to measure inequality of opportunity, that circumstance (father's rank) accounts for less than 10% of income inequality in a society.

Today, in the plethora of studies measuring inequality of opportunity (IOp), it is not uncommon to explain 30%, even 50% of income inequality, as due to circumstances. Of course, these studies look at many other circumstances in addition to father's income rank! This shows how the IOp theory has greatly *reduced* the set of actions for which people are implicitly held responsible. The 'harsh and paternalistic' accusation against luck egalitarianism is belied by the results of scholars who apply the theory to real data. I doubt Anderson has looked at these studies, because very few philosophers look at data. If I can show that, in my country, 50% of income inequality is due to factors that anyone would agree individuals should not be held responsible for, whereas the standard conservative view in my country is that everyone should be capable of pulling herself up by her bootstraps, I have a powerful argument to reform tax, educational, and healthcare policy.

Around the time that the analytical Marxists were presenting their response to Rawls (and Nozick) there was also the so-called communitarian critique of liberalism. Were you ever attracted by these communitarian ideas of, for example, Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor,

¹⁹ See Roemer (1993) for this early proposal; see Roemer (2002), and Roemer and Trannoy (2016) for subsequent 'progress reports'.

among others? Did they ever inform the discussions during the meetings of the September Group?

No, I wasn't; and we didn't.

You have presented a criticism of Amartya Sen's capability approach as being insufficiently specified (Roemer 1996, 191–193). To be more precise, the claim you make is that a partial ordering (of functioning vectors and capability sets) is an insufficient specification of the object of interest in the context of distributive justice.²⁰ This is interesting for a variety of reasons, not least because it is a very precise—and very prescient—articulation of a point that has come to occupy the minds of those who are, in principle, committed to the capability approach (we are thinking here of the debate, internal to the capability approach, on whether or not the approach should have a list of relevant capabilities). And further, it presents, we think, a very general challenge to Sen's entire oeuvre which assumes without much argument that partial orderings of states of affairs or opportunity sets are a sufficient specification for the analysis of concepts like rationality, justice, poverty, inequality, and freedom.²¹

But to attempt a defense of Sen, why isn't a partial ranking of functioning vectors and capability sets a sufficient specification? Further, one might argue, a partial ranking (of functioning vectors and capability sets, and for that matter, most objects of social interest, like justice) is not just a sufficient specification of objects of interest in social and political thought, but such a ranking is all that we can really hope to get. Indeed, to demand completeness would be to demand a level of

²⁰ This is closely tied to discussions on the *extent* of measurability we may hope to get in any analytic exercise. To see why, recall that a partial ordering or ranking is a reflexive, transitive, but not necessarily complete binary relation that stands for a ranking of social states of affairs or opportunity sets (or whatever object the relation is defined over). Partial orders can be seen as a very minimal form of measurability (still weaker forms of measurability—that is, weaker than partial rankings—are, for example, so called fuzzy orders; for an introduction, see Barrett and Salles 2011). Stronger forms of measurability will involve stricter restrictions on the binary relation like, for example: (i) complete orderings; or (ii) numerically representable complete orderings (the so-called ordinal utility scale); or (iii) numerically representable complete orderings that are invariant up to positive affine transformations (the so-called interval scale); or (iv) numerically representable complete orderings that are invariant up to positive multiplicative transformations (the so-called ratio scale). In the context of the capability approach, Sen argues that a partial ranking of functioning vectors and of capability sets is all that we can hope to measure. Demanding more than this is a mug's game for Sen (see Sen 1985). But Roemer is asking Sen for a stronger measure (minimally, Roemer is asking for a complete ordering of these objects).

²¹ See the collection of papers in Sen (2004).

precision in measurement that the object being measured does not in fact have. How would you respond?

When Sen first proposed his capability approach, the ‘functionings’ he mentioned were, as I recall, all objectively measurable. Indeed, the Human Development Index (HDI) for countries that is published each year by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is an average of income per capita, the literacy rate, and life expectancy of the country, three objectively measurable statistics. A few years later, he added happiness as a functioning.²² I do not know why he did this, but I conjecture that he came under attack from neoclassical economists for ignoring the subjective nature of well-being that is at the heart of neoclassical economics. I, for one, preferred his original approach, where functionings were all something that outside observers could agree upon.

At that time, almost thirty years ago, I viewed Sen’s defense of partial orderings as a kind of cop-out, of his not being willing to make hard choices. Quite a few people working in social choice in those years were trying to characterize *complete* social orderings axiomatically. Today, I am not so bothered by this, as Sen has surely played a progressive role in social science, and I think the Human Development Index is an important statistic to have.

Questions of power appear in your writings on political competition and democratic theory. And yet, the topic of power, more broadly—and social and structural power, more concretely—is not as well articulated and focused in your other writings. This seems surprising given the importance of power relations—and their relevance to exploitation—in Marxism. Has this been a conscious choice?

This is an interesting question. In part, the answer has to do with the tools I learned as an economist. Let me begin with Marx, who wanted to show that the inequality (or exploitation, although we could just say income inequality) of capitalism comes about even if all economic transactions are ‘fair’. Instead of fair, one might better say ‘competitive’. In other words, the vast inequality of capitalism can come about when all workers compete with each other and all capitalists compete with each other. In economics lingo, we say that every buyer and every seller is a price-taker. Neither capitalists nor workers have the power to set wages or prices.

²² See Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi (2009) for the proposal to include a ‘happiness’ or ‘quality of life’ measure in addition to those of income, literacy, and life expectancy.

This is akin to tying one hand behind one's back. It's much easier to show that differential wealth could emerge with cheating, price-fixing, monopolistic practices, physical coercion, and so on. I think Marx was right in this methodological choice. In modern terminology, we'd say that we want to show the genesis of vast inequality of income and wealth—and indeed of exploitation of labor—in a competitive model. This is why I worked with the model of competitive equilibrium in my book on exploitation and class. I showed you could deduce the central Marxian facts about class and exploitation in a perfectly competitive model.

In particular, this means that the important aspects of capitalism can be understood *even if* no individual has market power.

However, it must be said that I am a product of my time. My intellectual development as an economist occurred during the heyday of the general competitive equilibrium model. Had I been educated twenty years later, I might well have worked more with non-competitive models, as are often used in game theory.

Here's another consequence of this approach. Many leftists believe the key to understanding capitalism is to understand the extraction of labor from labor power at the point of production. And indeed, I think Marx sometimes erred in thinking this, as well. My view is that the essence of capitalism is the set of institutions which sanctify and enforce private and unequal ownership of capital—that is, vastly unequal wealth.

Now, workers, surely, do face all kinds of oppression at the point of production—bosses who crack the whip, speed up the assembly line, fire workers who organize, etc. There is a constant struggle at work between workers and bosses about the conditions of work. Today, we see this most dramatically in the low-paid service sector.

I think these struggles occur because of the impossibility of writing a complete and costlessly enforceable contract regulating the exchange of labor power for the wage. The labor contract is notoriously incomplete. The worker shows up at the job in the morning, and at the end of the day, collects a wage. But what happens between showing up and collecting the check is contention and struggle. Imagine one could completely specify exactly what the job entails and what the wage is, and if either the worker or the boss tries to deviate from the agreement, an arbitrating robot immediately enforces the contract. Then there would be no struggle at the point of production. But we'd still have capitalism, exploitation, and inequality, because those things occur even in perfectly competitive equilibrium!

It's in this sense that I believed that power—in at least one form—is not of the essence in capitalism. Now at the more macro or systemic level, wealth brings political power, which produces laws favouring the reproduction of capital, and so on. Of course, I am most interested in political power. In the last analysis, power comes in the police force that enforces property relations. This is the key locus of power; oppression of workers at the point of production, though perhaps very important in building class consciousness of workers, is relatively small potatoes. Coercion at the point of production was essential in feudalism and slavery, but capitalism has subtler techniques for accumulating wealth.

Allow us to dwell a little on the claim that the problem at the point of production is really the (practical) impossibility of writing a complete contract. This also relates back to the prior discussion of intra-class conflict. One of the general results in the literature on principal-agent problems—particularly, those problems arising from the asymmetric information about labour productivity that workers and employers have—is that, given such asymmetric information, optimal (second-best) contracts reward more efficient, or productive, agents with positive rents.²³ This means that incomplete contracts, due to asymmetric information, benefit more productive workers and, as we know, productivity itself is significantly tainted by the arbitrariness of the birth lottery. Wouldn't it be fair to say then that the incompleteness of voluntary contracts itself gives rise to intra-class conflict (between more and less productive workers) at the point of production and that, hence, one of capitalism's 'subtler' types of power is not just related to the reproduction of capital but also to the exacerbation or fuelling of intra-class conflict? We are wondering about the importance of intra-class conflict also because it comes up, as you have shown (1998b), in the political arena as well—when voters vote not just over economic (distributive) issues, such as taxation, but also over other salient noneconomic issues, such as race in the US context. Hence, in addition to these more specific queries, our question is also more general: what kind of theoretical role do you see for intra-class conflict, and if there is any, conflict in which class(es) is the most relevant one?

The point you make (I cannot easily check the Laffont-Martimort citation) is interesting, but it does not strike me as more significant than the effect that trade unions have on *reducing* wage differentiation between skilled

²³ See Laffont and Martimort (2002, 41–43) for a concise presentation.

and unskilled workers. New work using big-data methods in trade union history shows this is a pervasive and significant effect. It's a general phenomenon, which is observed most dramatically in the Scandinavian economies, where the 'solidaristic wage' entails raising the wages of unskilled workers and lowering the wages of the skilled. One effect of this solidarity was to build strong unions, high labor productivity, and high labor-force participation rates. If wage differentials are higher than competitive differentials in a world of complete information, then they are surely much lower than competitive differentials in a world with strong unions. The social solidarity that exists in Nordic countries is, I conjecture, both an effect and a cause of their relatively low degree of income inequality.

I believe racism is the Achilles' heel of the working-class movement in the United States. It is, I think, the main reason that a large section of the white working class supports right-wing politicians who advocate economic policies that impoverish those same workers. Absent racism, the US would be much closer to European-style social democracy. Obama received only 10% of the white vote in Alabama in the 2012 presidential election—most of those white voters were working-class. We need hardly mention that Donald Trump's support among white men with low educational levels has hardly suffered from his open racism and misogyny.

III. BARGAINING, JUSTICE, AND SOCIALISM

We will come back to the importance of solidarity in the next section, but for now let us turn to a theme that, to us, seems to connect your earlier work on Marxian exploitation and equality of opportunity, on the one hand, and your later writings on socialism more broadly, on the other. This common thread—or at least one thread among many—seems to be your criticism of bargaining theory as a suitable framework for discussing distributive justice. Over the years, you have argued that the utilitarian model underlying bargaining theory—the fact that, in the final analysis, its objects consist of thin utility pairs and nothing else—makes it “informationally too impoverished to capture the important issues in distributive justice” (Roemer 1986b, 90). This is of course a criticism made famous by Amartya Sen—the so called critique of ‘welfarism’—but on the basis of this criticism you have gone beyond Sen and have defended the use of a much richer informational framework, what you have called an economic environment. This allows incorporating issues of preferences, needs, resources, and rights,

including property rights.²⁴ Is this a fair explanation of your motivation to discard the bargaining framework in favour of the economic-environment framework? Was the main reason the informational penury of standard bargaining theory—as well as progressive alternatives like Sen’s account—which did not capture the importance of having a framework where property rights can be explicitly represented and discussed?

This is an important question, but we should clarify for readers that what Sen, and later I, were criticizing is that many of the models in social choice theory and what is called bargaining theory take the only language to be the language of utility. The building blocks of all theory are the vectors (or lists) of utility numbers that persons realize under different policies, or institutions, or systems. There is no way to formulate private (or public) ownership of firms because property rights are not ‘utilities’. Sen showed, with a simple example, that our moral intuitions often require the idea that people have *rights*: but rights do not exist in a model where the only way to describe a person’s situation is by his utility.²⁵ (Sen’s example spoke of human rights, whereas I referred above to property rights. Neither can be represented in a welfarist framework.) Think of Locke, or Nozick. Property rights (who owns the external world, who owns a person’s labor power) are of the essence. Utilitarianism is a theory that judges the goodness of a situation by the vector of utilities of persons that is associated with it: how that utility vector was generated is of no interest.

Now one might respond: in the final analysis, we are interested in human welfare. So, property or human rights are only important in so far as they generate patterns of welfare or utility across persons. However, one’s

²⁴ Economic environments are used in Roemer’s latest book, *How We Cooperate* (2019a), but see Roemer (1986b, 1988b), and Moulin and Roemer (1989) for earlier motivations of the framework. For Sen’s critique of welfarism, see Sen (1979).

²⁵ Sen’s ‘human rights’ example has two parts. Let x and y be two states of affairs, involving two agents, r (rich) and p (poor). In x , there is no redistributive taxation, while in y , some of r ’s money is taxed away for the benefit of p , but r remains richer than p . Suppose that the utilities of r and p in the two states are: (10, 4) in x , and (8, 7) in y .

Next, let a and b be two states of affairs, and let r (“a romantic dreamer”) and p (“a miserable policeman”) be two agents. r has a happy disposition, is rich, in good health, etc.; while p is morose, poor, in ill health, etc., and his only pleasure is torturing other people. In a , no torturing takes place, while in b , p tortures r . Suppose that the utilities of r and p in the two states are: (10, 4) in a , and (8, 7) in b .

Sen’s point is that whatever one’s ranking between x and y , it must be the same as that between a and b . If one believes that y (redistribution) is better than x (no redistribution), but that a (no torture) is better than b (torture), then, to account for this, one must bring in non-utility information. See Sen (1979, 473–474) for a fuller discussion.

language is severely impoverished if one cannot refer to property or human rights. Recall one of Sen's examples.²⁶ Under standard feudalism, let us say, the welfare levels of the Serf and the Lord are one and ten, respectively. Now suppose we can change this to four and six by reducing the days of labor that the Serf works on the Lord's demesne. Or, alternatively, we can improve standard feudalism by allowing the Serf to whip the Lord every Friday, in which case their welfare levels are also four and six. If you have only utility language to discuss outcomes, you must be indifferent between these two 'policies', for they are equivalent in their utility consequences! Most of us think that achieving (4, 6) by allowing whipping is a very different thing from achieving it by changing the labor contract.²⁷

I extended Sen's critique of welfarism in the theory of equality of opportunity that I proposed. The language of that theory includes circumstances, effort, and type. These are fundamentals, along with utility. One cannot judge how just a situation is by knowing only the welfare levels of people in it: one must know *how hard they tried* and what their *circumstances* were. The equal-opportunity theory is *non-welfarist*. It's not only rights talk that is banned by welfarism, but all non-utility talk.

We wonder—from an intellectual-history perspective—whom did you see as the main interlocuter(s) you wanted to convince with this work? Was it economists and game theorists, such as John Harsanyi and Ken Binmore, who at that time were cementing a tradition—among economists and political philosophers—of modeling the question of distributive justice as a utility-allocation problem? Or political philosophers of the contractarian tradition, such as David Gauthier, whom you do mention in your writings, who were picking up on bargaining theory as a framework for discussing distributive justice? Or was your intended audience different?

I came to think about these problems from a Marxist background, where *exploitation* was the key idea, and the grounds for the critique of capitalism. Exploitation, par excellence, is a non-welfarist idea. We don't say exploitation is bad because it gives the worker lower utility than the capitalist: we say it is bad because it violates the freedom of the worker to develop her capacities, or that it is the consequence of unequal ownership of capital that came about through robbery and pillage. There is also a

²⁶ See note 25 for this example.

²⁷ Author's note: But not all of us. My friend David Donaldson, a welfarist, responds: 'On the contrary, it would be great if we could have solved the injustice of feudalism by allowing some Lord-whipping, instead of having to go through bourgeois revolutions.'

condemnation of exploitation along grounds of freedom. These are all non-welfarist reasons for attacking exploitation. Of course, I absorbed the Marxist critique long before learning the philosophical concept of welfarism.

My own first attempts to work on distributive justice used welfarist models—the models of axiomatic bargaining theory. I eventually saw how welfarism severely restricted and *over-simplified* the discussion of justice in economic theory. I argued that we should study justice using economic models, where we have a language for ownership, commodities, markets, and so on. After all, one cannot even define what socialism and capitalism mean without such a language.²⁸

Coming back to the question of property rights, you have argued for making a distinction between common ownership and public ownership. Common ownership of a resource refers to “the right of each to free access” to the resource (1988b, 700) and should be distinguished from public ownership. While you have not provided an explicit definition of the latter, in your axiomatic discussion of allocation mechanisms that respect public ownership, you have drawn on the idea of respecting the right of use, as opposed to the right of ownership (1988b, 705). And the distinction between these two kinds of property rights seems to run throughout many of the proposals for market socialism you have advanced over the years. Is it fair to say that, for you, the full right of ownership should be restricted to labour power; while, for all other factors of production, the relevant property right is that of the right of use? Further, is it fair to see this distinction as motivating your proposal for a coupon economy (1994b, 75–84), for example, and, more recently, for a sharing economy (2020b, 27–32)?

I am unsure how we should define common and public ownership. If a village owns some land, upon which all members of the village can graze their livestock without formal constraint, that is surely common ownership. However, if this practice leads to overgrazing, and the village restricts how much each resident can graze in order to sustain the land, that land becomes publicly owned. If, however, residents learn to choose how much they graze by Kantian optimization instead of Nash optimization, and they thereby sustain the land without need of formal restrictions, I suppose I would say the land is still owned in common. Public ownership, I think, should mean that everyone in the community has

²⁸ Author’s note: One article where I presented this view was Roemer (1986b).

access to the land under rules established by the community, which are constraining, while common ownership is a system with no stated rules. Perhaps common ownership is analogous to common law, where there is no written constitution, but tradition suffices to regulate the commons.

I do not agree that ‘the full right of ownership should be restricted to labour power’. We should not have all the rights over our labor that a slave-owner has over a slave—this would be full ownership of our labor power. If the talents we have are in part morally arbitrary, they should in part be owned by the community. For a person not to be a full self-owner does not mean the community is free to harvest one of his kidneys to transplant into another, but it may well mean that he must pay taxes on his earnings to the state. To be a self-owner means (according to G. A. Cohen) that a person has *all* the rights over his bodily powers that a slave-owner has over a slave. To be a *non-self-owner* means a person does not have *all* the rights over his bodily powers that a slave-owner has over a slave. It’s a logical error to say that a non-self-owner has *none* of the rights that a slave-owner has over a slave. The libertarian attack on common ownership of talents—that it would expose everyone to possible kidney harnessing—is a non sequitur.

We would now like to turn to two of these practical proposals for implementing the ideal of socialist equality of opportunity. In 1994, writing in A Future for Socialism (1994b), you argued for a form of managerial socialism, which would give every citizen an equal and tradeable share in the beneficial ownership of the means of production. In this system, there is a coupon stock market in which coupons are freely tradeable for shares in firms but not monetisable or bequeathable. In what way was this a form of socialism—as opposed to, say, a form of corporatism or, to use Lenin’s term, ‘state capitalism’?

It isn’t state capitalism, because the state does not receive the profits of firms: these profits are distributed to citizens as individuals. Furthermore, individuals can trade their rights to receive the dividends of particular firms on a stock market. But it isn’t private ownership of firms by citizens, because an individual cannot capitalize his right to receive firm profits by selling these rights to another individual for *money*. I intended this system to insure that every citizen had a right to a share of the nation’s capital income, which he could not relinquish. This is very different from the coupon capitalism that was introduced in some Eastern

European countries in the early 1990s, in which the poor rapidly sold their coupons for cash to the rich.

Suppose I live in a city which has a large park that all city residents can freely visit. I cannot sell my right to a person in another city to use our park. The only way I can sell my right to use the park is to sell my apartment and move out of the city. I then transfer my right to use the park to the person who buys my apartment. The right to capital income from the nation's firms in the coupon economy is this kind of right. I don't think it's appropriate to call this state capitalism or corporatism.

The sharing economy you have defended more recently (2020b) is similar to the coupon economy in at least one respect (although we will come back to the major difference, the idea of a behavioral ethos, a little later)—both models of public ownership tend not to include worker control over the firm. Does worker control have a secondary, or derivative, role in your vision of socialism? And, if so, wouldn't that make this vision liable to being overtaken by another ruling class, this time in the form of managers?

There certainly is worker *ownership* in my model of the sharing economy. There is also, so I propose, ownership by investors. In the sharing economy, a person receives a share of the firm's profits by either investing or working in the firm. Under capitalism, one can purchase a right to firm profits by buying another person's right to receive profits, by purchasing her shares. In the sharing economy, there is no stock market—rights to profits only go to investors and workers. Granted, I have not discussed worker *management*.²⁹ My view is that the board of directors should consist of workers, investors, and other citizens. Probably the closest model today is the German corporate system.

As you acknowledge, one of the more controversial proposals in the sharing-economy model is the idea of ownership by investors. The vision behind this proposal includes a pool of households which can supply capital, or labour, or both, and so which can receive profit shares proportional to their investment, or labour, or both—at least in the non-degenerate variants of the model where residual profits are not allocated entirely to workers. Yet, given the current patterns in the ownership of capital, if such a model were implemented, it is plausible to conjecture that, as you say, “class differences will continue to remain

²⁹ Author's note: Investors buy bonds issued by the firm, not stock.

between those whose incomes come primarily from labor, and those whose incomes have a significant capital component, and membership in these classes will therefore continue to be closely correlated to social and economic advantage in family background” (Roemer 2020a, 24). Particularly so, if the model allows for the existence of labour and bond markets. Doesn’t the implementation of this vision require a substantial redistribution of capital before it is put in place? And, in general, how do you envision implementing the model—and the initial conditions it requires—in practice?

Absolutely it does. Not only must there be high estate taxes, preventing the transmission of large amounts of wealth to descendants, but the distribution of wealth must be far more equal than it is today *inter vivos*. Thomas Piketty (2020, chapter 17) discusses taxation in some detail. He speaks of the “progressive tax triptych: property, inheritance, income” (2020, 981). I have little to add beyond his discussion, except for the motivation for substantial wealth taxation, which is to provide the conditions for sustaining a solidaristic society. That is to say, there is an inconsistency between permitting positive returns on private investment, and maintaining conditions on distribution that will support solidaristic economic behaviour. In my view, what has to give is unconstrained accumulation. I emphasize that this is, I believe, the key problem of socialist finance. If the state is not to own all the wealth in society, then households must be able to invest, and that would lead, without sufficient taxation, to inequality of wealth, lack of solidarity, and political influence by the wealthy. I cannot claim to have the definitive solution to this problem, but I follow the tradition of James Meade and others who thought that a property-owning democracy was a feasible version of socialism. The alternative, of having the state be the sole owner of capital, has its own pathologies, as we know.

Models of market socialism—among others—have been criticised by, for example, feminist economists and philosophers that, while the models pay careful attention to the conditions conducive to the reproduction of capital, they do not pay sufficient attention to the conditions conducive to the (physical) reproduction of labour.³⁰ The sharing-economy model, which is indeed attentive to investment incentives, seems to be liable to the same criticism. Have you thought about this objection,

³⁰ See Müller (forthcoming).

and, particularly, about the ways in which incentives for the reproduction of labour can be similarly aligned in practical terms?

I believe that the *sine qua non* for a society that invests in people is solidarity, which, as I say, requires a quite equal distribution of income and wealth. That's why I focus on material distribution. Obviously, the socialist society should invest in education, health, housing, infrastructure, the arts, research, and so on—that is, the basis for the 'production' of successful human beings. I am impatient with critics who claim that those of us who focus on the distribution of income and wealth do not care about these things. If one is a democrat, one understands that the only way to produce good policies is to have a solidaristic polity whose members will choose the right politicians and policies. Capitalism is a system which breeds greed; most successful capitalists are greedy people, and this infects the whole society, as Marx made abundantly clear. We see a glimmer of what solidaristic societies would look like when we examine the Nordic countries. Leftists in these countries are highly critical of their societies, and bemoan the departure from a more solidaristic period after the Second World War. But for global human society, I believe these countries remain a beacon. Preserving their example is of utmost importance to the world.

Let us now turn to your more recent thinking about socialism with a very general question. In 1988, G. A. Cohen outlined three overarching issues that “should command the attention” of those working “within the Marxist tradition” at the time:

They are the questions of design, justification, and strategy, in relation to the project of opposing and overcoming capitalism. The first question is, What do we want? What, in general, and even not so general terms, is the form of the socialist society that we seek? The second question is, Why do we want it? What exactly is wrong with capitalism, and what is right about socialism? And the third question is, How can we achieve it? What are the implications for practice of the fact that the working class in advanced capitalist society is not now what it was, or what it was once thought to be? (Cohen 1988, xii)

How would you, most broadly, answer these questions today? Is it fair to summarise your answers as follows: we want equality of opportunity, because of the injustice of the unequal capitalist distribution of the means of production, and we can achieve it through market socialism?

We want socialist equality of opportunity (Cohen's term) and we want to build a cooperative ethos, because I conjecture that the only way of achieving sustainable equal opportunity is through cooperation. I'll expand upon this below. I believe a version of market socialism is the path to take.

Related to Cohen's strategy question above, in acknowledging the changing nature of the working class, you said that "[t]he proletariat, those who own nothing but their labor power, no longer constitute a majority of advanced capitalist societies. Nor are the neediest [...] clearly members of the productive working class" (1994b, 15-16). How would you define the working class today? And what do you think is the size and scope of the petty bourgeoisie today? We ask this latter question also in relation to the class-exploitation correspondence principle you talked about earlier, because the petty bourgeoisie in those models is the only one for which the principle does not—realistically—hold as a one-to-one correspondence; that is, for which class membership does not necessarily imply exploitation status. Finally, in light of these class changes, if any, what are your current views on the usefulness of a class-based analysis?

The class-exploitation correspondence principle (CECP) is a theorem relating the class position of a person in capitalist society to her exploitation status—whether she is exploited, is an exploiter, or is neither.³¹ Because I have come to think that exploitation is a detour around our main concern—to implement socialist equality of opportunity—I now think of the CECP as a contribution to the history of thought. The CECP shows that one can define exploitation and class position independently, and then prove that there is a tight relationship between the two characterizations of an individual (worker, capitalist, rich kulak, landed laborer, etc.). Marx defined exploitation quite abstractly, in terms of labor commanded versus labor expended, which is not evidently the same thing as a person's class position, his relationship to the means of production. But he did not possess the economic theory to show precisely the link between these two central concepts of his theory of capitalism.

I do not have anything special to say about class analysis. One part of Marxism I continue to find enlightening is historical materialism, which has an important role for class struggle. I find it useful to view evolution in the economic structure as a mandated adjustment to technological

³¹ For more on the CECP, see the discussion, and references, on page 137.

change. Historical materialism, as explained by Cohen in his magisterial book on the subject,³² views class struggle as the midwife on the birth of new social systems, although not the fundamental cause of that birth, which lies in ‘the development of the productive forces’.

IV. KANTIAN OPTIMIZATION AND THE FUTURE OF SOCIALISM

Let us turn to your most recent book, How We Cooperate: A Theory of Kantian Optimization, to which the current issue of the EJPE is devoting a book symposium. The book systematises your work on Kantian optimization across a series of papers in the 2010s.³³ In a recent manuscript, you argue that “any socio-economic system has (in my view) three pillars: an ethos of economic behavior, an ethic of distributive justice, and a set of property relations that will implement the ethic if the behavioral ethos is followed” (Roemer 2020a, 3).³⁴ The behavioral ethos of socialism, you continue, is cooperation and you propose to model this “cooperative ethos” with the concept of Kantian optimization. This you contrast with the “individualistic ethos” of capitalism which, you say, is “neatly modeled by Nash optimization” (Roemer 2020a, 5). The manuscript thus places the concept of Kantian optimization in this ambitious project that follows naturally from your work throughout the years. And yet, this more ambitious project is absent from How We Cooperate where Kantian optimization is presented more narrowly as an alternative—descriptive and normative—solution concept to the dominance of Nash optimization. We have two questions here. First, which of these two motivations—the broader or the narrower—was what inspired you to work on Kantian optimization in the first place? And, second, why did you omit the broader role of Kantian optimization as a model of the socialist cooperative ethos from How We Cooperate?

It was the narrower goal—to conceptualize cooperation as something quite different from individualism, as a project in game theory—that motivated my work on Kantian optimization. Indeed, the ‘three pillars’ idea that you mention only congealed in my thinking recently. That’s why it’s not in the book *How We Cooperate*.

³² See Cohen [1978] 2001.

³³ See Curry and Roemer (2012), and Roemer (2010, 2015). See also the 2019 special issue “Cooperative Behaviour, Kantian Optimisation and Market Socialism” in the *Review of Social Economy* 77 (1).

³⁴ For a more accessible discussion of these same issues, see Roemer (2020b).

Research is full of luck and serendipity. When I discovered the approach of Kantian optimization, I felt as if I had found a \$5 bill lying on the sidewalk. A nice alternative to Nash optimization, which resolved the tragedy of the commons and the free-rider problem. It took me literally years to pick up that \$5 bill, and to notice there was a \$100 bill lying underneath it. This was a solution to the design problem of socialism that Jerry Cohen expounded. The 2020 ‘three pillars’ paper that you cite even proposed, boldly, that each economic system has its specific form of rationality—individualism (Nash optimization) for capitalism, and cooperation (Kantian optimization) for socialism. I will attract much flak, I think, for this proposal, and I may in the end abandon it. Let’s see what people have to say about it.

The design problem, just to be clear, that Jerry Cohen proposed was that although we have many ideas about the goals of socialism, we lack the engineering details to make it work. The design details of capitalism that make it function are the ‘greed and fear’ induced by huge wealth inequality and markets. My alternative design of cooperation conceived of as Kantian optimization is a specific answer to Cohen’s challenge to replace greed and fear. I fully expect others to improve upon it.

In the book, your main motivation of the assumptions behind Kantian optimization is grounded on the concepts of ‘solidarity’—“in the sense of our all being in the same boat”—and ‘trust’—“trust that if I take the cooperative action, so will enough others to advance our common interest” (2019a, 6). Why did you choose solidarity and trust instead of, for instance, a more Smithian concept such as ‘empathy’? In a joint 1991 chapter with Ignacio Ortuño-Ortín, you defended the possibility of interpersonal comparisons of utility precisely on this latter basis—that is, empathy—when you said that “it may be quite reasonable to suppose the existence of an interpersonal ordering of the states of the world, based on a kind of empathy that a person can legitimately feel, because he has, during his life, indeed been a person of various different types” (Ortuño-Ortín and Roemer 1991, 321). Doesn’t Kantian optimization also require interpersonal comparisons, not in the traditional cardinal sense, but in this broader sympathy-based sense?

Yes, it does. Kantian optimization works by forcing actors (players in a game) to take into account the externalities, positive or negative, of their actions for others. The trick is to find an appropriate sense in which our joint actions enjoy a kind of symmetry. This can be described as ‘taking

the action one would will be universalized', which is the link to Kant. I find cooperation, as so described, as easier to achieve than altruism. It may be quite close, however, to empathy.

Could you expand on the relation between your account of Kantian optimization, on the one hand, and your luck egalitarian account of the central injustice of capitalism, on the other? By luck egalitarianism, income differences due to choice, adequately compensated for differences in luck, are just. It follows that a form of capitalism, the 'cleanly generated capitalism' of luck-compensated choice, is just. But such capitalism is likely, if not bound, to conflict with the 'cooperative ethos' warranted by Kantian optimization. Does the 'cooperative ethos', at least from some point on, preclude what is just?

No, it's the opposite. The constraint against a fully luck-egalitarian ethic is the need to restrict income inequality in order to preserve the cooperative ethos. I claim human nature is incompatible with cooperation among individuals whose incomes or consumptions differ by orders of magnitude. So, to preserve cooperation, we must limit income and wealth inequality, and therefore, perhaps, a fully luck-egalitarian system.

*Implicit in the view that there are three pillars to a socio-economic system is the claim that it is not sufficient to define capitalism and socialism as modes of organizing activity with very different underlying property relations. There is, of course, an old tradition within socialist thought which holds that behavior matters as well, and it gets a powerful articulation in G. A. Cohen's *If You're An Egalitarian How Come You're So Rich* (2000). But how did you come to this view?*

I came to this view because cooperation has long been a characterization of socialist behavior. Until recently, I thought of cooperation under socialism as fully represented by collective ownership of capital. I now think that such ownership is insufficient to characterize cooperation. Cooperation refers to *behavior* in economic behavior, which is insufficiently summarized by property relations of a certain kind. The contrast between individualism represented by Nash optimization—going it alone—and cooperation as represented by Kantian optimization—hanging together—is self-evident. As I've said, whether one should go as far as saying these represent system-specific forms of rationality is an open question for me. I say this third pillar of an economic system—it's behavioral ethos—is as important as the other two.

As a follow-up to the previous question, what in your view is the relation between the notion of historical materialism, which you have acknowledged you are still attracted to (Adereth and Hodges 2019), and the notion of a behavioral ethos?

I think I have covered that. What I'm proposing is that there is a specific behavioral ethos associated with any economic structure. You might ask me, what's the behavioral ethos of feudalism? I invite suggestions from readers.

In A Future for Socialism (Roemer 1994b, 28–36), you outlined a short five-stage history of the idea of market socialism. The ideas of incentive compatibility and the principal-agent problem are two important developments you note in this history. These ideas, however, are based on a kind of Nash optimization. Do you believe that they are also relevant for Kantian optimizers? Put differently, do Kantian optimizers face incentive-compatibility constraints?

This is a very good question, which I've danced around, but have not thought about sufficiently. The only place where I've addressed the issue is section 3.3 of *How We Cooperate* (2019a, 51–53). It deserves deeper consideration.

One place where a version of incentive compatibility comes up is in my insistence that trust among the players of a game is a necessary condition of their playing the Kantian equilibrium. In a simple Kantian equilibrium, each player is supposed to take the action she would like everyone to take (say, going out on strike). I say that each must *trust* that if she takes the Kantian action, then so will all (or at least most) others. If others, in contrast, play the Nash-optimal action, she who plays the Kantian action will generally be very badly off—she will be exploited, if you will, by the Nash players. (What would happen if *only one worker* goes out on strike, when the Kantian action is that all should do so?) To say that trust is required for the players to take the Kantian action is therefore admitting that, in the absence of trust, it is reasonable for a player to take the Nash action—to avoid being left out on a limb by the (non-cooperative) others. This is admitting that the player contemplating the Kantian action should not be expected to take it *unconditionally*, but only on the assumption of the cooperative behavior of others. This is a version of incentive compatibility. In contrast, a true Kantian, one who follows the categorical imperative, must be committed to taking the Kantian action regardless of what others do, because morality requires it.

Questions of epistemology have been central to Marxism, in for example, discussions of false consciousness and ideology. Have you worked on or thought about epistemic issues?

I've written a short piece on epistemic questions in the theory of equality of opportunity, but that's it.³⁵

As a segway to the next section, you have made the case for Kantian optimization, as a rival of Nash optimization, on the basis of the properties that the equilibria it gives rise to satisfy (at least in the most fraught situations plagued by positive and negative externalities). Have you thought about approaching the problem of adjudicating between these (and other) solution concepts from a more general Arrowian perspective—the kind of approach that is standard in cooperative game theory? What would be an indispensable list of desirable properties that you would like a solution concept to satisfy, and would these be context-dependent?

I've come to think that the approach of axiomatic characterization practiced by social choice theorists is only worthwhile if the axioms are few and transparent, and the result is surprising. Arrow's impossibility theorem and Nash's solution to the bargaining problem are examples that pass the test. A less well-known example is the Hart-Mas-Colell axiomatization of the Shapley value, which requires only a single axiom.³⁶ In the case of Kantian versus Nash optimization, I think the two approaches are so transparently different, and so clearly related to individualist and cooperative behavior, respectively, that little would be gained by the kind of axiomatization you suggest. But I do not want to discourage you from thinking about the problem.

To take one salient property, Pareto efficiency features prominently in your work as a desirable property that Kantian—but not Nash—equilibria satisfy in canonical situations plagued by positive and negative externalities. More generally, from our experience, Pareto efficiency is perhaps the first property that an economist would point out as a desirable property for an equilibrium to satisfy. Why, in your view, should people care about efficiency?

Efficiency means not wasting resources. This is obviously of huge importance. Saying so does not imply one would never trade off some

³⁵ See Roemer (2020c).

³⁶ See Arrow ([1951] 2012), Nash (1950), and Hart and Mas-Colell (1996), respectively.

efficiency for greater equity. Often, however, one can achieve equity and efficiency at the same time. It is that goal that characterizes the best economic analysis. Excessive carbon emissions, inducing damaging climate change, is perhaps the greatest inefficiency of our time; it is a classical example of the difficulty of achieving efficiency in a global economy with public goods and bads. Kantian optimization enables us to see the precise link between lack of global cooperation and climate change.

You mentioned earlier that, in the final analysis, the theoretical superiority of the Kantian protocol over the Nash protocol, in terms of both efficiency and equity, would need to be tested in real-world economies. Have you seen evidence that this superiority also holds in past or present existing economies?

I think that we should examine the experience of the Nordic economies to see if their success, to a degree, is a result of Kantian optimization. I have some conjectures, but no results to discuss at this point. In almost all capitalist countries, I see trade-union consciousness, or more generally working-class consciousness, as closely linked to Kantian optimization. I am currently studying actual vaccination behavior in a society as perhaps being better explained by Kantian optimization than Nash optimization. Showing this requires some careful analysis. Recycling and other behaviors to reduce environmental degradation are another example where Kantian optimization seems to better explain behavior than Nash optimization. My hope is to show that there are indeed many examples of Kantian optimization today, in many societies: in part, we tend not to see them, because we (economists at least) look at the world through the lens of Nash optimization. Recall the warning ‘equipped with a beautiful hammer, every problem looks like a nail’.

V. METHODOLOGY AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Your work, together with that of Jon Elster, has been called ‘rational choice Marxism’ because, unlike ‘analytical Marxism’, it is committed to methodological individualism. You have defended this methodological position extensively in the past,³⁷ although you have also been explicit in recognising the limitations of “the individualist formulation of the economic problem” (1978, 149) that underlies neoclassical theory.

³⁷ See the 1982 debate between John Roemer, Jon Elster, Gerald Cohen, Philippe van Parijs, Johannes Berger, Claus Offe, and Anthony Giddens in *Theory and Society* 11 (4).

Have you ever considered straying away from methodological individualism? Just to be clear: we are asking about methodological individualism which is to be contrasted with the type of, one might say, behavioural individualism you spoke of earlier (Nash optimization vs the cooperative individualism of Kantian optimization).

I agree with Elster that a complete explanation of a social phenomenon requires exhibiting the mechanism whereby it occurs. In one of his recent books, Elster proposes that the study of mechanisms should be the full program of social science.³⁸ I probably would not go that far: that is, I believe there is a role in social science for observing relationships, even if one cannot prove causation. The search for mechanisms is the search for causation by human decisions. Is it fair to say that Newtonian mechanics, despite its wonderful precision, is not a full mechanism in Elster's sense? For it provides no explanation for gravity: it 'merely' describes how gravity behaves, but does not answer the question of how it comes to be that masses of atoms attract each other.

In my own recent work, the question arises as to what would cause a group of people, engaged in a project that can be modeled as a monotone game, to employ Kantian optimization rather than Nash optimization as their optimization protocol. I have said there are three requirements for such cooperation: desire, understanding, and trust.³⁹ People must desire to cooperate, based upon their understanding that if such cooperation succeeds, the results will be better for them than they would be if everyone 'goes it alone'. Furthermore, each must trust that if she cooperates, so will others—as I have noted above. This is to a degree a methodologically individualist explanation. But, like the problem of gravity, it does not go deeply enough. I have further argued that our brains seek symmetry, and our concept of morality is deeply linked to symmetry.⁴⁰ Skeptics can argue that I am only *describing*, not *explaining*.

I must comment on your citing my 1978 article in which I said that mass action is not individually rational. I wrote mass action is explained by collective rationality, and I attacked 'constrained optimization' as an instance of neoclassical economics that a Marxist would not use. I now blush at those words. Of course, I did not have the concept of Kantian optimization in 1978; I would now explain mass action as an instance of it (see, for example, my model of 'strikes' in *How We Cooperate*, 2019a,

³⁸ See Elster (2007).

³⁹ See Roemer (2020b, 44).

⁴⁰ See Roemer (2019a, 70).

54–57). Although a generous reader might allow me to interpret Kantian optimization as a more precise formulation of the ‘collective rationality’ referred to in the 1978 article, there is still much in that article that I now disown.

A common objection to rational choice Marxism is that it makes no room for endogenous preferences or for macro-structural constraints. G. A. Cohen, for example, argued that the proletarian in a capitalist economy is individually free to enter bourgeois society (for example, by starting her own shop), but the proletariat as a whole is not collectively free to do so. This is a macro-structural constraint. How does your version of individualism deal with the problems of endogenous preferences and macro-structural constraints?

It seems to me that what you call macro-structural constraints are dealt with by the equilibrium method, in the sense that supply must equal demand at equilibrium. That seems to ‘explain’ Cohen’s example of the collective unfreedom of the proletariat under capitalism. I think the lack of a full theory of endogenous preferences is a major weakness of economics. Progress is being made on this front, however, with many people thinking about culture, as you say.

Finally, allow us to turn to a few questions on economics as a discipline and as a practice, and particularly in its relation to philosophy. In 1996, you wrote that “economics is the handmaiden in this relationship [between economics and philosophy]. The economist’s way of thinking can check the consistency of a philosophical theory or provide a concrete formulation (a model) to make precise some of its still vague assertions” (1996, 3). This statement was made in the context of theories of distributive justice. Have your views on this changed? What do you now think is the value of the philosophical and the economic way of thinking?

Jerry Cohen once said to me that the goal of philosophy is to formulate vague ideas as precise questions. Once an idea is posed as a precise question, philosophers move onto something else—they lose interest in it. Economics, in contrast, attempts to answer precise questions. It does not typically worry about the vague idea that must have led to the precise question. If this is the intellectual division of labor, then obviously both philosophy and economics are important.

We see most of your work, both your past and your most recent writings, as falling unambiguously in the domain of welfare economics. Is this a fair characterization? Indeed, your recent work on Kantian optimization has even replicated and extended the first theorem of welfare economics to the case of socialist economies populated by agents optimizing according to the Kantian protocol.⁴¹ And yet, it is hard to disagree with Anthony Atkinson (2001) that, compared to the heyday of welfare economics in the 1960s and 1970s, that approach has ‘strangely disappeared’—at least from the mainstream discussions and standard curricula. When Angus Deaton put the same question to Amartya Sen, Sen noted that the loss associated with the ‘strange disappearance’ of welfare economics is not just exclusive to economics. Even the discipline of philosophy has lost something valuable.⁴²

If indeed you agree with Amartya Sen and the late Anthony Atkinson, we have three related questions. First, should this ‘strange disappearance’ be seen as a loss—both as a loss in economics, and as a failure to bring serious economics into philosophy—and if so, why? Second, what, in your view, has been responsible for this loss, with respect to both disciplines? And finally, how do you think welfare economics should, if at all, be incorporated in the economics and the philosophy curriculum today?

Of course, I agree that the disappearance of welfare economics is unfortunate. I’m not sure, however, that I would focus upon rejuvenating it. The most imaginative work among progressive economists today is empirical work: the work on inequality by Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, on inequality of opportunity in the United States by Raj Chetty and his lab at Harvard, the imaginative work on economic history by young scholars like Suresh Naidu at Columbia University and Avidit Acharya at Stanford. This is where the energy appears to be—I am simply naming a small number of scholars as representative of a much larger group. I’d also like to give a plug to the wonderful new introductory economics textbook project CORE, written by a team led by Samuel Bowles and Wendy Carlin.⁴³

We ask about welfare economics not only because it is regrettable that it has ‘strangely disappeared’, but also because tackling most pressing

⁴¹ See chapter 13 in Roemer (2019a); see also Roemer (2019b) and, for a discussion, Maniquet (2019). An accessible, informal, presentation of these results is in Roemer (2020b).

⁴² See Sen, Deaton, and Besley (2020, 17–18).

⁴³ The textbook is freely available online at core-econ.org.

issues today requires the kind of interdisciplinarity that used to inform the work of welfare economists. What in your view are the most pressing issues—in terms of both specific questions as well as broad research agendas—that we need to be tackling today?

Surely it is right to emphasize interdisciplinarity—although this has become somewhat of an empty mantra. I am less familiar with what is happening among young philosophers; I am skeptical that there is the kind of creative explosion based on the careful use of data that I have described in economics. I hope I am wrong. Surely Katrina Forrester’s work is important although it is marking the closing of an era in political philosophy, not the beginning of a new one, isn’t that right?⁴⁴

The EJPE is an interdisciplinary journal, and our readers are scholars who either work at the intersection of philosophy and economics, or are at least open to such an interdisciplinary approach. We would like to ask you to address a couple of questions which might be particularly pressing for young scholars just entering the field. First, do you think that there is an ideal profile, an ideal set of skills, or at least an indispensable set of skills, that someone who follows a philosophy-and-economics approach should have or strive to develop? Second, how should one go about developing these skills? Finally, and somewhat in relation to the second question, what set of specific readings—or courses—would you recommend to junior scholars who are just starting out and starting to adopt an interdisciplinary philosophy-and-economics approach?

You make me feel like the jazz artist in the mid-twentieth century—I forget who it was—who was asked by a journalist: ‘Where do you think progressive jazz is going?’ He responded: ‘Man, if I knew that, I’d already be there.’ A young left-wing intellectual who wants to do good work should focus on the aspect of the academic trade that she enjoys. One must love the practice of the trade in order to put in the thousands of hours needed to become proficient. In my case, the trade was mathematics, but I certainly wouldn’t say everyone has to learn mathematical modeling. Great contributions are made by people in all fields. Technological change may also be influential (shades of historical materialism): the important empirical work being done now in economics would not have developed absent the computer and the internet. Do what you enjoy doing, and attempt to make a long-range plan of what you want to accomplish. Pick a problem

⁴⁴ See Forrester (2019).

and work on it hard. I find it takes about ten years for my work on a problem to become mature, so be patient. In an intellectual life of forty years, count yourself a success if you can develop to fruition three or four good ideas.

Professor Roemer, thank you so much for sharing your time and ideas with us.

And I thank you. It has been my pleasure to ponder the astute questions that you have posed. It is shy-making to see that you have paid such detailed attention to my meandering path.

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