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Cohen’s childhood hood
Cohen’s youth

• 1957 – McGill, BA Arts (a ‘salad of subjects’ + economic history in the first year and Political Science and philosophy in the 2nd)

• Philosophy – to look less bourgeois

• Oxford – ‘new form of philosophy, which is talk about talk’.
Cohen’s trajectory
• BPhil – New College
  Quinton
  Ryle
  Berlin
• UCL – 1963
• Chichele Chair - 1984

https://youtu.be/80AovwgVY8Q
On Bullshit

- ‘Bullshit’ (in a technical sense)
  - Dishonest or just not concerned with the truth—Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*
    - Not false but phony
  - ‘Unclarifiable unclarity’, obscure, shifts ground—Cohen, ‘Deeper into Bullshit’

- Example: ‘This is precisely the first meaning to which we can give the idea of dialectic: a logic or form of explanation specifically adapted to the determinant intervention of class struggle in the very fabric of history.’

- Cohen: ‘If you read a sentence like that quickly it can sound pretty good. The remedy is to read it more slowly’ (KMTH)

- → Non-bullshit/analytical Marxism
Freedom and the working class

• The Right: the workers are not forced/are free to work
• The Left: the workers are forced to work
• Cohen: both are true!
  • If I’m forced to do X, I am free (not prevented from) to do X
  • What I’m not free to do is NOT-X
    Workers are free to work; not free to not work

• The Right: also free to not work
• Cohen: a worker is free to (not) work for a specific capitalist; but workers in a capitalist system are not free collectively
Robert Nozick

- ‘Taxation is on a par with forced labour’
  - Similar to capitalist exploitation! – theft of worker’s labour time
  - Self-ownership!
- Just distribution – result of voluntary transfer
Force and voluntariness

• What about the workers who do not transfer their labour voluntarily?
• But – Nozick says - the proletarian is not forced to work, while the capitalist is forced to pay taxes
  • The worker may have no acceptable alternative but whether ‘this makes his resulting action non-voluntary depends on whether these others had the right to act as they did’
• but this makes the whole argument circular
  • A distribution is just if it’s the result of voluntary transfer
  • A transfer is voluntary is in accordance to rights (i.e. just)
= a distribution is just if it is just
John Rawls

*A Theory of Justice*

- **Justice is the first virtue of social institutions**
  - As truth is of systems of thought.

- Principles of justice for the basic structure of a (well-ordered) society
  - The basic structure = the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social cooperation
  - Major institutions = political constitution and principal economic and social arrangements
The main idea

• All social primary goods should be distributed equally, unless an unequal distribution of any, or all, of these goods is to everyone’s advantage
  • Inequality (of wealth) is justified if necessary make the worst off better off (than equality)
• Primary goods: all-purpose means (liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, bases of selfrespect)
• Conception of justice that counters (to a degree) the accidents of natural endowments and the contingencies of social circumstance
The incentives argument - Cohen

- The difference principle also applies to personal choice
- Assumption that inequality is necessary - why?
  - The talented would not work as hard
  - But they could! It’s just that they wouldn’t!
  - The talented/wealthy = the kidnapper

- If they are committed to Rawls’s main idea (the difference principle) and its default assumption (equality) – they would not need an incentive to work harder

- Well-off: “Look here, fellow citizen, I’ll work hard and make both you and me better off, provided I get a bigger share than you.”
- Worse-off: “Well, that’s rather good; but I thought you were agreeing that justice requires equality?”
- Well-off: “Yes, but that’s only as a benchmark, you see. To do still better, both of us, you understand, may require differential incentive payments to people like me.”
- Worse-off: “Oh. Well, what makes them necessary?”
- Well-off: “What makes them necessary is that I won’t work as hard if I don’t get more than you.”
- Worse-off: “Well, why not?”
- Well-off: “I dunno ... I guess that’s just the way I’m built.”
- Worse-off: “Meaning, you don’t really care all that much about justice, eh?”
- Well-off: “Er, no, I guess not.” (in Narveson)
## Cohen’s point

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<th>Society</th>
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<th>Reds</th>
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<tr>
<td>Society A</td>
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<td>Society B (Rawlsiana)</td>
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<td>Society C (Cohen’s)</td>
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• Who are the worst off, how did they get there?
• What about people with disabilities?
• The DP does not compensate them for their disability
• Focus on primary goods; some people have more expensive needs
  • Maybe we should focus on welfare?
Equality of welfare?

• But Louis: cultivated an expensive (champagne) taste
  • (or Scrooge? Gamblers?)

• ‘expensive if they are such that it costs more to provide her than it costs to provide others with given levels of satisfaction or fulfillment’

• Dworkin: should not be compensated
  • So not equality of welfare
Cohen: Paul and Fred
The expensive tastes debate

• Cohen: ‘people can be unlucky not only in their resource endowments but also in their unchosen liabilities to pain and suffering and in their unchosen expensive preferences’

A large part of the fundamental egalitarian aim is to extinguish the effect of brute luck on distribution = luck egalitarianism

Dworkin: Fine, Paul did not choose his taste but would he?
  • Test: whether Paul identifies with his taste = chooses it
  • If yes, he’s responsible for it so no compensation

• Cohen: but he did not choose the cost of his taste (unless snobbish taste);
  - if he identifies with it – reason for compensation

And so so, and so on, and so on...
The point of Cohen’s argument

• Dworkin – the cost of one’s preferences – the costs on others – market

• Cohen – denies that
  • Others’ preferences – brute luck from our point of view – ‘it is unjust if I have to pay more for figs than you do for apples simply because few people like figs and many like apples’
  • The market is not a good mechanism for distribution – ‘a mere brute luck machine’
  • Those with a minority taste - at threat from majority preference
    • ‘sometimes a taste is expensive because few share it and there are therefore diseconomies of small scale in the production of what satisfies’ (e.g. Irish language, philosophy, rural public transport)
  • Welfare should be part of the metric of justice
Why not socialism?

• Life as a camping trip
• Some inequalities – consistent with justice but repugnant to socialism because large inequalities contradict community
• ‘community’ = ‘people care about and, where necessary and possible, care *for* one another and too, care that they care about one another’
• Communal reciprocity – not required for equality but required for human relations to take a desirable form
  • = the anti market principle according to which I serve you not because of what I can get in return but because you need or want my service and you, for the same reason, serve me