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Why Not Community? An Exploration of The Value of Community in Cohen's Socialism

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Abstract

The work of prominent analytical Marxist, G.A. Cohen, offers a vision of socialism with distributive justice and community at its core. While Cohen's views on distributive justice have been hugely influential, much less has been said about community. This article argues that community plays three distinct roles in Cohen's socialism. One is as an independent value, the second is as a necessary adjacent counterpart to justice, which serves both to restrict and facilitate distributive equality, and the third is as a critique of the liberal contractualist view of humanity. We argue that these are distinct and valuable elements in Cohen's thought, and each must be recognized to understand the range and implications of Cohen's socialism.

It is still an unsettled and highly debated question within political philosophy exactly how we are to understand socialism. Socialism can be understood, for example, as a property relation, distribution of power in society, or as an altered, non-exploitative relation between producer and surplus value. Alternatively, perhaps, socialism is Marx's "realm of freedom" contraposed to the realm of necessity. It is undoubtedly hard to disentangle the accounts of what socialism is from the question of what makes socialism valuable. This is the case because for most socialists, socialism is the best (if not the only) route to achieving something valuable and worthwhile.

This article contributes to our understanding of what makes socialism valuable by exploring a neglected aspect in the work of influential analytical Marxist and life-long socialist, G.A. Cohen, namely the value of community.¹ In his early work, Cohen focused on the Marxist theory of history (Cohen 1978; 1988).² He later contributed immensely to contemporary debates over distributive justice (Cohen 2011; 1995; 2008). Specifically, he was pivotal in developing the influential responsibility-sensitive theory of justice known as luck egalitarianism (Cohen 1989; 1993; 2004; 2006; 2008). Luck egalitarians generally agree

¹ For other relevant discussions of Marxism and community, see (Holm 2020; Spafford 2019; Verma 2000).

² For Cohen's own personal reflections over Marxism see especially (Cohen 2013b; 2001).

that we have reasons of distributive justice for rectifying inequalities when they do not reflect people's exercise of responsibility (Arneson 1989; 1999; Knight 2009; 2013; Lippert-Rasmussen 2001; 2001; 2016; Rakowski 1993).³

In his last published book, *Why Not Socialism?*, Cohen identifies two distinct ways in which inequality can be bad. First, inequalities are unjust when they violate luck egalitarian justice – the principle of socialist equality of opportunity – because then someone is disadvantaged without this being a result of their own choice or fault. Second, inequalities can be impermissible, according to Cohen, even when not violating the requirements of distributive justice. This happens if these distributions threaten the principle of communal caring, “that people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another” (Cohen 2009, 34). Cohen calls this the community principle. Community such understood “is put under strain when large inequalities obtain” (Cohen 2009, 34). While Cohen's work on distributive justice is widely discussed, the community aspect remains, as Vrousalis has aptly put it, “an important but neglected strand of Cohen's humanist thought” (Vrousalis 2015, 98).⁴ This article discusses several aspects of Cohen's community principle, in particular its content and its relation to Cohen's principle of distributive justice. While Cohen touches on these questions, he leaves much to be discussed.

It is clear that Cohen believes community to be distinct from distributive justice, but the relationship between community and justice is not always well spelled out in his socialism. In some places, Cohen's socialism seems to imply that justice presupposes community and the collective realization of the commitment to implications that follow from this (Cohen 2008). Elsewhere, Cohen emphasizes the distinctiveness of the value of community compared to the value of egalitarian justice (Cohen 2009). And even when he does, community involves several aspects such as communal caring and communal reciprocity (Cohen 2009). Cohen both defends community as a dimension of value in its own right and suggests communal reciprocity as an alternative to market-based reciprocity, which implies an inherent critique of market capitalism. In other words, the community principle plays several roles in Cohen's writings, sometimes valuable in its own right as a supplement to justice, sometimes

³ Miller has argued that Cohen should not be considered a luck egalitarian (D. Miller 2014a), but this is a minority position (Albertsen 2017; Lippert-Rasmussen 2016).

⁴ For some recent discussions, see however (Albertsen 2019; Choo 2014; H. P. Frye 2017; H. Frye Forthcoming; Gilabert 2012; Noonan 2012; B. D. King 2018; Roemer 2017; Spafford 2019; Vrousalis 2015; 2010; 2012).

constitutive of justice, and at times critical of justice in a way similar to his critique of the market. And it seems that Cohen was not always clear on which of these to employ. In this paper, we explore and elaborate on the content and different functions of community in Cohen's socialism. We identify three different roles that community plays – as an independent socialist value, as an adjacent counterpart to egalitarian justice, and as a critical counterexample to the liberal contractualist view of human nature.

The content of Cohen's community

The first question explored in the paper is the content of Cohen's community. What does it mean, for Cohen, that people live in a community? Following Cohen's treatment of community in *Why not Socialism?*, we can say that the requirement of community is "that people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another" (Cohen 2009, 34). On Cohen's account, community involves two forms of communal caring.

The first concerns the importance of equal challenges (or abilities to relate). Cohen stresses that vast inequalities can undermine community. This happens when people "enjoy widely different powers to care for ourselves, to protect and care for offspring to avoid danger and so on" (Cohen 2009, 36). Cohen points out that "we cannot enjoy full community, you and I, if you make, and keep, say, ten times as much money as I do, because my life will then labour under challenges that you will never face" (Cohen 2009, 35). Seemingly, the concern here is that if inequalities become too large, people will be unable to relate to challenges faced by others. While Cohen often presents such lack of community in terms of economic differences, it seems important to note, as Lippert-Rasmussen does, that other experiences, such as cultural barriers, matter as well for people's ability to relate (Lippert-Rasmussen 2016, 224).

The second form of mutual caring in Cohen's community is communal reciprocity, which pertains to people's motivations. This is not, Cohen emphasizes, "required for equality" (Cohen 2009, 35). The form of mutual caring becomes relevant when the reasons for which people trade, work, or in other ways engage in productive activities, fail to reflect communal reciprocity. In the spirit of communal reciprocity, Cohen submits, "I produce in a spirit of commitment to my fellow human beings: I desire to serve them while being served by them" (Cohen 2009, 41). This motivation is based on the wish to serve others. As opposed to

engaging with people for purely selfish reasons (we explore this part in more detail in the next section) (Cohen 1994, 9; 2008, 82; 2009, 39). Cohen notes how classic proponents of the market were quite clear that it utilized problematic motives to desirable ends (Cohen 1994, 10; 1995, 263), mentioning Mandeville's *Private Vices, Public Benefits* as an example (Cohen 2008, 179 n72; 2009, 79). Cohen compares this communal interaction to the relationship existing in a family or among friends (Cohen 2008, 225; 2009, 51). There is thus a motivational component in Cohen's understanding of community. At times, Cohen takes this a step further and makes the stronger claim that under capitalism, people are motivated by greed and fear (Cohen 2009, 77). This seems too crude a depiction, so we here follow Steiner and Frye in focusing on the claim that interactions are not motivated by a wish to serve others (H. P. Frye 2017; Steiner 2014).

The third element in Cohen's community is a justificatory part. In his discussion of Rawls, he employs an interpersonal test (Cohen 2008, 42). Those receiving incentives in the form of higher wages should be able and willing to justify such an advantage in a conversation with the worst off. Those who cannot justify their advantages to others, in a way that would pass such an interpersonal test, are outside what he terms the justificatory community (Cohen 2008, 44–45).⁵ They are then also, we may assume, outside any real or proposed community.⁶

Thus, Cohen's conception of community involves several elements. Furthermore, the value of community plays different roles in Cohen's writings, and it is difficult to grasp in its entirety the complex function of community in his socialism. Community plays an important role both as a restriction on and as constitutive of principles of egalitarian justice. In addition, community often appears as an independent value in Cohen's writings. Moreover, we will argue, community holds potential for a socialist critique of the view on humanity offered by liberal contractualism. We elaborate these different roles of community in Cohen's socialism in the following sections. We begin with the question what kind of value it is.

⁵ See also the imagined conversation in (Cohen 2009, 7–9).

⁶ The three components listed here follow (Albertsen 2019). Not everyone agrees with this depiction. Roemer considers altruistic behavior to be part of Cohen's community (Roemer 2017, 306). Some leave out an equal challenges component (R. W. Miller 2010, 250; Van Schoelandt 2014). Some include a shared body of experiences component (R. W. Miller 2010, 250; Van Schoelandt 2014), while Archer does not include either of these (Archer 2016). Lippert-Rasmussen discusses three components similar to those presented here, but not in a way where they all need to obtain for community to obtain (Lippert-Rasmussen 2016, 222–26).

What kind of value is community?

It is clear by now that community is a central part of Cohen's socialism, and that the relationship between the value of community and distributive justice is a complex one. We elaborate this complexity in the next section, but in this section, we ask what kind of value community is according to Cohen. We think there are two important entries to this question: the relation to the socialist valorization of fellowship and equality and the moral criticism of the marketeer relationship. In Cohen's writings, these aspects of community often go together. Here, we will try to disentangle them to analyze what type of value community carries in Cohen's socialism.

In several places, Cohen expresses the relational, or social, morality inherent in a community, which makes it morally superior to market-based relationships.⁷ According to Cohen, the latter involves being motivated by greed or fear or at least by considering others as predominantly sources of enrichment (Cohen 2009, 40). Cohen remarks several places in his work⁸ that "these are horrible ways of seeing other people" (Cohen 2009, 40). The statement serves as a critique of the capitalist market, so the most general point is that since the market is immoral, or "is mean in its motivational presuppositions", we need an alternative, more communal, way of relating to each other. Consequently, one aspect of the value of community is its inherent moral character. In being morally superior to human interaction on the market, community holds value as facilitating an appropriate way of seeing other people. This relational morality includes both communal reciprocity – seeing other people as equal members of the same community – and communal caring, i.e., it is an important end in itself for a person to care for others within this community.⁹ Hence, whatever type of value community is, it is evident that it holds both an other-regarding aspect, in that communal reciprocity involves the value in perceiving and treating other people as equals, and a self-regarding aspect, in that communal caring implies that it matters from one's own perspective to be morally concerned about other people. As argued

⁷ According to Vrousalis, this critique is aimed at "not an innocuous forum for exchange of goods and services, but what Marxists call generalized commodity production" (Vrousalis 2010)

⁸ See (Cohen 1991; 1995; 2009).

⁹ This is illustrated in Cohen's book *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* On its final pages, Cohen shares the story of his father, who is laid off, then brought back to work only to be fired once more. This illustrates how the market encourages us to treat people in accordance with a market norm "that promotes 'efficiency' but corrupts humanity" (Cohen 2001, 181).

by Spafford, this value aspect of community can be grounded both on the welfare-gains for each individual living in a society in which people see each other as equals and the independent morality in the disposition to feel that way about one another (Spafford 2019, 228).

As mentioned, Cohen repeats his critical statement that the market is based upon a structure of reciprocity that facilitates "horrible ways of seeing other people" several places in his works. But the argumentative step that follows that statement has developed in subtle but important ways. Compare the following sentences, which all follow the market-critical statement, but in different works, and all capture communal relationships:

I) "In (at least one kind of) non-market motivation I produce because I desire to serve my fellow human beings while being served by them." (Cohen 1995, 262).¹⁰

II) "I said that, in community motivation, I produce because of my commitment to my fellow human beings and with a desire to serve them while being served by them."(Cohen 1994, 218):

III) "I said that, within communal reciprocity, I produce in a spirit of commitment to my fellow human beings: I desire to serve them while being served by them."(Cohen 2009, 41)

The first, and oldest, expression says nothing explicitly about community. Its main focus is not *the* moral motivation one has in a community but *that there are* other kinds (or, at least, one other kind) of motivation besides market-related self-interest to serve other people and be served by them. This sentence is a pure market criticism that expresses the moral deficiency in relating to one another as fellow marketeers. Hence, importantly, in (I) Cohen points out the existence of a morally superior way to relate to other people than the one seen on the market, and this involves *desiring* to serve while being served by fellow humans.

The second expression mentions community but as community motivation. Here, then, the morally superior way of living together – also mentioned in (I) – as being motivated by

¹⁰ The formulation there is adapted from (Cohen 1991).

serving while being served is explicitly connected to the idea of community. One explanation is that Cohen's aim here, in "Back to Socialist Basics," is not merely to provide a criticism of market capitalism – it would largely suffice to show that market relationships are morally defective – but also to offer a positive defense of basic socialist values, in this case, the value of social fellowship – i.e., community. Thus, in (II), community is valorized as carrying the social basis for binding people together in moral commitments that are in themselves desirable, and in which they see themselves as both committed to serve and equally entitled to be served by others.

The third and final expression is similar but explicitly adds the idea of communal reciprocity. By this addition, Cohen reiterates community as the alternative (to the market) way of standing in reciprocal relations to other people. The desire to serve and be served by others is hence becoming the other way of living together. Community is here not only a socialist value – something to be valued in and of itself – but also a way of perceiving the relationship between oneself and others, which binds people together in moral commitments. This fits the aim of *Why Not Socialism?* well, since Cohen is here trying to elaborate socialist principles that he thinks would be both valuable and feasible (or, at least not unfeasible) in contemporary societies. That Cohen expresses this idea, in this work, with the expression of producing "in a spirit of commitment" is interesting as it relates to his development of the egalitarian ethos necessary for a society to unfold egalitarian justice (we shall say more about this in the next section).¹¹

Consequently, in Cohen's socialism, the value of community is threefold. First, community as a fundamental basis for living together as equals is a basic socialist value. This value aspect involves an alternative, more attractive way of living together than the one provided by the market, and also by the idea of an institutional social structure from liberal contractualism. There is an inherent critique of liberalism (not merely market capitalism) here (which we elaborate below) that invokes and adds to the value of a socialist basis for relating to each other as equals. The morality of liberal contractualism implies reciprocal equality only in the half-hearted sense of committing each other to social institutions built on the foundation of rational self-interest. Socialism, on the other hand, values communal

¹¹ For important and recent discussions of Cohen's ethos, see (Albertsen 2019; Carens 2014; Casal 2013; Furendal 2018; 2019; 2020; Johannsen 2017; Titelbaum 2008; Holt 2011; McTernan 2013; Voigt 2019; Pérez Muñoz 2016).

equality *because* it is in a human being's genuine interest to live in a community of equals – which includes both treating others as equals and being treated as an equal by others. The way community bears the basic socialist value of equality, then, is that one's society is non-hierarchical in the sense that everyone enjoys equal respect and no one has privileged access to positional goods such as status and power, and that material inequalities are not, for related reasons, too significant (Cohen 2009).¹²

Second, community is valuable through people's recognition of the realization of the superior, non-market morality. This is expressed in Cohen's effort to make explicit that not only is it better if people enjoy communal equality than if they merely respect each other as part of rational, self-interested marketeer logic; it is also better *for them*. It is better in itself that *they* endorse this "for-them" value. We find this point expressed in (I) and (II) cited earlier by the inclusion of the term that we *desire* to serve and be served. In *Why not Socialism?*, it is made even more explicit. In the 2009-edition, Cohen adds to the sentence, "and I get satisfaction from each side of that equation" (Cohen 2009, 41). What that means is not (only) that the two necessarily go together, so that you cannot have one without the other, but that there is a moral value to be endorsed on both sides. Even if you could be served without serving, you *shouldn't* and *wouldn't* want to (if you were to realize your communal part of your human morality) without contributing back to your communal fellows. In this sense, community is the bearer of a superior moral value (in comparison to the market) to be both realized and endorsed by its communitarians. While Cohen is rather vague in his argumentation for this claim to the value of community – in *Why Not Socialism?* it largely relies on an intuitive argument – we think it is possible to construct an argument upon a Marxist idea of alienation from human nature. We elaborate this argument in the last section.

Third and finally, and as we shall discuss further in the next section, community is valuable as the necessary facilitator of the spiritedness (i.e., the egalitarian ethos) that enables a society to become just. Evidently, this value is instrumental in so far as its valorization comes from its contribution to the value of justice, but it is nonetheless community that provides the contribution. In contrast to the market as well as liberal contractualist social institutions, the community is constitutive of, and maybe even

¹² See also (D. Miller 1989; 2014b).

necessary for (sometimes Cohen seems to believe so),¹³ the realization of principles of distributive justice. If this is the case, then community has important instrumental value as a condition for the value of justice. Thus, we end this section by concluding that community is a central, but complex, moral value in Cohen's writings as being both valuable in and of itself (qua expression of basic socialist moral equality), valuable for the members of a community through their endorsement of the communal way of relating to each other, and often instrumentally important for the realization of distributive justice. The next section continues where this ended by discussing the relationship between community and justice, which is, we should add, more complex than what we have so far accounted for.

Community and distributive justice in Cohen's socialism

Having laid out the content of the value of community in Cohen's socialism, we will now examine its relationship to distributive justice. For Cohen, community is indeed more than justice. This is clearly the case as some things that are not unjust can be problematic from the perspective of community. This is illustrated when Cohen notes that even though we cannot forbid stark inequalities, which reflect differential exercises of responsibility, in the name of distributive justice, they "should nevertheless be forbidden, in the name of community" (Cohen 2009, 37). As community and distributive justice are essentially different values, and thus the relationship between them is a good example of Cohen's pluralism, it becomes important to disentangle them and their role in Cohen's vision of socialism.¹⁴ Building on these observations, this section addresses two questions: One pertains to the relationship between community and distributive justice, while the other addresses the content of the ethos, which has a prominent role in Cohen's socialism. How should we perceive the relationship between community and distributive justice in Cohen's socialism? This question is important because even though community and justice may conflict, as already illustrated, they also relate to each other in other ways.

Vrousalis suggests that Cohen must have rejected that community is sufficient for distributive justice and further that Cohen would have rejected that distributive justice is sufficient for community (Vrousalis 2015, 110–11). We have already seen that justice is not sufficient for community. This is the case because justice allows for distributions in conflict

¹³ Especially in (Cohen 2008).

¹⁴ See also the discussion regarding the relationship between them in (Lindblom 2021)

with community (i.e., we can have justice without community).¹⁵ Is community then sufficient for justice? Albertsen argues that this is not the case, using the example of an irreversible, accidental injustice as one that may exist even among people who live in a Cohenian community (Albertsen 2019). That neither justice nor community is sufficient for the other to obtain, however, does not rule out the possibility of community and distributive justice co-existing.¹⁶ It only shows that they are different values that may come into conflict. Their incommensurability does not preclude the thought that one of them may, in some circumstances, be important for realizing the other. The importance of the latter observation becomes very clear as we consider what Cohen writes about an ethos in relation to distributive justice.

In his critique of John Rawls, Cohen develops the idea that justice might require an ethos to be realized. According to Rawls, principles of justice, including the difference principle, apply only to the basic structure of society (Rawls 1996, 283). Cohen questioned this application of the difference principle (Cohen 2008, 32), arguing that principles of justice apply also to our daily lives and the choices we make.¹⁷ To achieve distributive justice, we may need people to act in certain ways, develop certain dispositions and choose to forgo or pursue opportunities in different ways than they currently do. In his critique of Rawls, Cohen's most important insight is that not only institutions but also individual choices affect the distribution of goods and burdens in society. According to Cohen, the Rawlsian view represents "an evasion of the burden of respecting distributive justice in the choices of everyday life" (Cohen 2001, 4). Choices of where to work, how much to work and the size of remuneration for working profoundly affect whether and the extent to which, for example, those with inborn talents fare better than others do. Choices could also concern whether to engage in legal tax evasion and choices with distinct influence on the amount of wealth available for other purposes, including improving the lives of the worst off.

Following from the justificatory element of the community principle, the willingness to justify one's holdings may be conducive to achieving a just distribution. The motivational component, the willingness to engage unselfishly in productive activities, may also be an integral element in achieving justice. Distributive justice may require a certain willingness to

¹⁵ To a similar effect, we could also have accidental justice. Cohen mentions this possibility (Cohen 2001, 132).

¹⁶ The idea that they are compatible is defended by (Albertsen 2019) and by (Parr and Williams Forthcoming).

¹⁷ See also (Johannsen 2013; 2016).

work for non-economic rewards. This theme features heavily in Cohen's discussion of an egalitarian ethos.

In terms of communal justification, Cohen relies much on Rawls' idea of a community's shared sense of justice.¹⁸ To Cohen, justificatory community is membership of a group with whom you share a public basis in the light of which citizens can justify to one another their common institutions.¹⁹ For Cohen, this implies that a just society presupposes an egalitarian ethos, but much of the same idea is already iterated in Rawls' theory of justice. Regarding the shared sense of justice between communal participants, Rawls says that,

[B]ecause we recognize that they wish us well, we care for their well-being in return [...] The basic idea is one of reciprocity, a tendency to answer in kind. Now this tendency is a deep psychological fact. Without it our nature would be very different and fruitful social cooperation fragile if not impossible [...] A capacity for a sense of justice built up by responses in kind would appear to be a condition of human sociability (Rawls 1971, 494–95).

There are thus strong similarities between what Rawls is saying here about the necessary psychological dispositions for a just system of cooperation and the role played by Cohen's egalitarian ethos.

Discussing the ethos is not only of interest to those taking up the task of debating the relative merits of Cohen and Rawls. It has a much broader range, and the importance of the discussions for egalitarian thought may be illustrated by an important trilemma discussed by Cohen. Egalitarians face a trilemma consisting of three important values: freedom, efficiency and equality (Cohen 2008, 184).²⁰ Three routes appear to the egalitarian, each of which compromises an important value: Providing incentives to the talented in order to make them more productive, thereby realizing two values but compromising equality. Forcing people to work productively, realizing equality and efficiency by violating freedom.²¹ Forgoing those

¹⁸ There is an interesting parallel to Segall's recent work (Segall 2016).

¹⁹ See (Cohen 2008, 45; Rawls 1980, 515-572.)

²⁰ The trilemma is also found in Carens' work and further discussed by several authors (Olson 2017; Vandenbroucke 2001; Wilkinson 1999)

²¹ For a very interesting argument in that regard, see (Stanczyk 2012). For a critique of the reasons Cohen offers for not forcing people to work in a specific line of work, see (Otsuka 2009).

two routes, denouncing economic incentives and forced labor, saddles us with a society that is free, equal and inefficient. Cohen argues that Rawls, when faced by the trilemma, prefers the route where equality is sacrificed through incentives to the talented. Old-fashioned socialists were more inclined to take the route of forced labor.²² For that reason, Cohen sometimes refers to this as the Stalinist solution to the trilemma.

Cohen rejects both routes just presented, argues that egalitarians need not abandon any of the three important values and presents an ethical solution to the trilemma. This draws on the ideas Cohen developed in his critique of Rawls, that our everyday choices should be guided by an egalitarian ethos. According to Cohen, the egalitarian ethos provides a viable solution to the trilemma. If people choose to put their talent to productive use not because they are motivated by economic incentives but because they are driven by their egalitarian commitments to the community, the trilemma is solved. This is the ethos solution to the trilemma. Cohen's work is explicitly inspired by Carens (Cohen 2008, 53; 2009, 65), who developed an economic model in which economic incentives are replaced by moral incentives (Carens 1981, 34). Supply and demand set wages to ensure information about where people's talents are needed (Carens 1981, 49; 1986, 34–37; 2014, 55), but wage differences are taxed away afterwards (Carens 1981, 73). The similarities with Cohen's ethos solution are clear. While at one point, Cohen seemingly considers Carensian socialism to be a realization of the full socialist ideal (Cohen 1995, 264), it is mostly discussed as an improvement compared to other market-socialist proposals.²³

Cohen often talks of the ethos as an egalitarian ethos (Cohen 2001, 126; 2008, 175), thereby emphasizing how the ideal of distributive justice, with all its redistributive demandingness, presupposes a collective spiritedness and collective understanding of equal belongingness to the same community. But knowing what we know about the relationship between distributive justice and community, the content of the egalitarian ethos cannot *only* be about distributive justice. If people are inspired by an ethos that merely tells them to strive for distributive justice – in the sense of ensuring that institutions and everyday choices secure distributive outcomes that are in accordance with luck egalitarian fairness, or social equality of opportunity – then we are left with the very real possibility that community is

²² See (Wilkinson 1999) for illustrative quotes in that regard.

²³ Furendal recently criticized the ethos solution for relying too much on the market (Furendal 2019). We believe this to be less of a problem once we take into account how the ethos is also informed by community.

compromised in the process. Those following such an ethos may realize justice but do so by sacrificing community. Following from already presented possible conflicts between distributive justice and community, this could happen because the large inequalities, while just, may make people unable to relate, or because distributive justice is for the most part silent regarding motivations. As we can have distributive justice without community, an ethos focusing only on distributive justice is insufficient for achieving both.

This certainly cannot be the purpose of Cohen's ethos, because, as we have argued, the ethos is anchored in the justificatory element of the community. Hence, if community and distributive justice are indeed, as Cohen believes,²⁴ separate values, and community holds value in the sense we have argued for above, community here plays the role as a necessary adjacent counterpart to justice. On the one hand it restricts justice, in the sense that choices made inspired by an ethos of community ensure that among several distributions in accordance with luck egalitarian distributive justice, those that does not infringe upon the value of community itself is brought about. Furthermore, community serves to constitute justice by providing for society the needed motivational spirit in the sense of the ethos.²⁵

Community, distributive justice, and the relationship between them offer interesting insights into Cohen's broader vision of socialism. In presenting his socialism as one of both community and distributive justice, Cohen invites the possibility of conflict between these values²⁶ and commits himself to a plausible explanation of how they can coexist and reinforce one another. Cohen is aware that this conflicts with at least some common understandings of what defines socialism. He thus rejects an understanding of socialism that defines it in a purely economic sense as collective ownership of the means of production (Cohen 2009). This should not be understood as a rejection of the importance of changing institutions but rather as an emphasis on how important it is that the values are also shared and acted upon by people. Hence the need for an ethos. Cohen never argues that we *only* need an ethos but rather that the ethos must supplement institutions, which supports our point that community also plays the role as necessary spiritedness constitutive of justice.

²⁴ For a note on Cohen's value pluralism, see (Cohen 2008, 4–5). For thorough discussion of this see (B. King 2015; Johannsen 2020; Vrousalis 2015, 108–10).

²⁵ By needed we do not mean necessary in the sense that community is a necessary condition for justice, but rather in the more everyday sense of the word as something that is likely to facilitate something else.

²⁶ Cohen explicitly writes that "It would, of course, be a considerable pity if we had to conclude that community and justice were potentially incompatible moral ideals." (Cohen 2009, 37)

Cohen acknowledges that the "famous Christian nostrum *for inequality to be overcome, there needs to be a revolution in feeling or motivation, as opposed to (just) in economic structure*", holds, "more truth in it than I [Cohen] was once prepared to recognize" (Cohen 2001, 120). Thus, we may say that Cohen's views have grown into a complex but coherent socialism centering on the coexistence of community and distributive justice, where the egalitarian ethos bridges these two values.

Community as a critique of liberal contractualism

The previous sections have discussed the value of community for Cohen and its relation to distributive justice. In this section, we shift focus to capture an often neglected role community plays alongside its other functions in Cohen's work. More particularly, we present the inherent critique of liberal contractualism underlying Cohen's community principle, which we see as a significant contribution to the understanding of Cohen's socialism. Moreover, as liberal contractualism has become the standard view in contemporary political philosophy, we should not underestimate the importance of this part of Cohen's writings.

On communal reciprocity, Cohen says, "Where starting points are equal, and there are independent (of equality of opportunity) limits put on inequality of outcome, communal reciprocity is not required for equality, but it is nevertheless required for human relationships to take a desirable form"(Cohen 2009, 66). Recall that within communal reciprocity, people serve each other based on a mutual understanding that they both need and want to be served by the other and that, for both, it is important that they *want to serve* the other. The other-regarding part of this conjunction is as important as the self-interested one, and this is what makes communal reciprocity different from market reciprocity. Importantly, it is also what makes communal reciprocity morally distinct from the type of reciprocity underlying contractualist accounts of justice within the tradition of liberal theory.

While Cohen touches upon several views, the works of Rawls, Nozick and Ronald Dworkin entertain him the most, and while Rawls' theory is the primary target of his criticism here, we believe his elaboration of the value of community involves a critique of them all. It is important to note, however, that the fact that communal reciprocity is most notably the important socialist counterpart to market reciprocity together with our claim that it also involves criticism of these liberals does not imply that liberal contractualism is

necessarily based on simple market logics. Arguably, as Buchanan noted (1990), we should distinguish between on the one hand *justice as reciprocity views*, which hold that only those who do or can contribute to the cooperative surplus have rights to social resources, and on the other hand *subject-centered justice views*, which in contrast base the claim-right for social resources on the moral status of individuals (regardless of ability to contribute). And where David Gauthier's contractualism (Gauthier 1986) and David Hume's circumstances of justice are examples of the former (though, according to Buchanan, different instantiations of it), Rawls' theory of justice and Dworkin's ideal of equality of resources are better described as instances of the subject-centered view. It follows that contractualist justice is not at all committed to a simple market-like view on reciprocity in which one person is willing to benefit another merely because she rationally suspects that this will ultimately benefit her. Certainly, communal reciprocity captured in the expression, "I serve you and you serve me – and in that conjunction itself I do not regard the first part – I serve you – as simply a means to my real end, which is that you serve me" (Cohen 2009, 67), can be seen as a direct antithesis to that marketeer form of reciprocity, but it is yet to be seen how this is also a critique of the liberal justice theories of Rawls and Dworkin, with which Cohen takes issue.

Now, Cohen is trying to convince us that the market has this inherent marketeer-reciprocity logic that will often lead us to relate to each other in this unequal and self-serving manner. But Cohen's critique here is not merely against markets. It is similarly an objection to the relational basis of contractualist justice in the liberal tradition. Some inequalities are not condemned by justice – e.g., when they are the direct outcome of chosen differences or fair bargains – but are repugnant to socialists nonetheless because they impede community. But why would justice allow repugnant inequalities in the first place? The explanation is that the assumptions laying the foundation for just institutions in a liberal contractualist theory are provided in reference to the malign, self-interested (and not the social, communal) parts of our human nature. In the liberal tradition, justice obtains, consequently, as a result of rational, self-interested persons engaging in collective production for the purpose of mutual benefit. So defined, communal reciprocity has already been excluded from the context out of which justice is given.

This theory-critical part of Cohen's community has often been overlooked, and indeed it is often implicit in his writings. However, he brings it to the fore in some of his discussions of

the incentives argument in his Gifford lectures from 1996 (Cohen 2001, 117–33). Cohen’s basic argument against Rawls’ liberal contractualism is that a just society is wider and more morally comprehensive than what can be captured merely by just institutions anchored in human self-interest. To bring out the liberal-contractualist assumption he wishes to target, he quotes the following passage from Rawls’ early version of *Justice as Fairness*,

If, as is quite likely, these inequalities work as incentives to draw out better efforts, *the members of this society may look upon them as concessions to human nature*: they, like us, may think that people ideally should want to serve one another. But, as they are mutually self-interested, their acceptance of these inequalities is merely the acceptance of the relations in which they actually stand, and a recognition of the motives which lead them to engage in their common practices ((Rawls 1958, 173) cited from Cohen 2001, p. 121).

The italics are Cohen’s, he uses them to highlight the part of the paragraph that is changed in the later *A Theory of Justice* version of the text, but the passage brings forward the basic assumption of liberal contractualism, which Cohen wishes to abandon, that the brute fact of selfish human nature is a bedrock of a just society. Cohen ends the section with these critical remarks,

It is as both the Rawls of 1957 and the Rawls of 1971 agree with Bernard Mandeville (and Adam Smith) that “private vices” make for “public benefits”—that (in other words) human selfishness can be made to benefit everyone—but that the Rawls of 1971 is unwilling to acknowledge that it is *indeed* vices which are in question. I agree with Mandeville—and Adam Bede—that that’s what they are (Cohen 2001, p. 122).

What Cohen is targeting here is not capitalism with its market logics and marketeer reciprocity but the founding assumptions of liberal theory that human self-interest is a legitimate (if not sufficient) rational foundation for justice. Community, in Cohen’s writings, here reminds us that this cannot be the case. The value of community enables us to see why we should accept the first part of the conjunction, *that I serve you*, even when separated

from the second part, *that you serve me*. We demand more of a just society than an institutional scheme built upon liberal assumptions about rational human self-interest.

This is evident, for example, in *Why Not Socialism?* where the value of community explains why we from a socialist point of view find some inequalities repugnant, even when they are not unjust. Cohen's particular example is a special high-grade fishpond, which one of the participants on the camping trip won fairly in a lottery in which everyone took part and is now the winner's private individual resource. There is nothing in liberalism, nor indeed in any type of contractualist account of institutional distributive justice, that objects to this distributive state of affairs, but Cohen insists that "even though there is no injustice here, you are cut off from our common life, and the ideal of community condemns that" (Cohen 2009, 66). To the extent that this scenario violates the ideal of community, communal reciprocity requires that the camping trip participants themselves condemn this and take genuine interest in its rectification. Community, not justice, is doing the normative work for equality in this case, and this is another example of Cohen's value pluralism. It is important to stress that nothing is implied about the ranking of these values. It does not follow – and Cohen is not claiming – that community takes precedence over justice. They are simply separate values in a pool of incommensurable values, and hence the critique invoked by the value of community against contractualist justice is not intended to demean justice as a value in its own right but rather to show that justice, as grounded on rational human self-interest, cannot account for a sufficiently equal and decent society.

This does not imply that justice and community are necessarily incompatible. As we have seen, community in other ways – through the egalitarian ethos – facilitates a just distribution. Moreover, principles of distributive justice may be justified in their own right, and will, as is the case with Cohen's socialist equality of opportunity, be supported by socialism. But it does show that communal reciprocity is not only a critical alternative to motivational forces on the market but similarly that the ideal of community invites an objection to the view of humanity provided by liberal contractualism. Since rational self-interest in bargains about the mutual benefits derived from social production is the basis for both capitalist markets and principles of justice, socialists ought, by their commitment to community, object to both.

Here Cohen is reiterating an area for critique of contractualism that other critics have pointed out more explicitly. Nussbaum, for example, pushes a similar critique against Rawls'

theory of justice and specifically targets the necessary exclusion of disabled parties within the bargain, but her general point is against the contractualist circumstances of justice as setting an artificial and unnecessary restriction on "being equals" as being of equal normal bargaining power (Nussbaum 2004). This is acknowledged accordingly in Nussbaum's list of universal entitlement of justice, specifically in her capability for affiliation, which is partly described as the capability to, "live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings to engage in various forms of social interaction; to be able to imagine the situation of another" (Nussbaum 2000, 78–79).

Cohen's community principle seems to hold a similar critique of liberal contractualist justice, but unlike Nussbaum's critique, which we may reasonably interpret as an objection coming from a perspective external to the contractualist framework, Cohen is explicitly aware that the critique invoked by community will to some extent problematize his own luck egalitarianism. The objection is that since resource allocation following from a redistributive scheme constructed around the hypothetical preferences of free and equal rational individual persons (in particular, Rawls' veil of ignorance or Dworkin's auction) already assumes a relational basis similar to that on the free market – Dworkin explicitly assumes this (Dworkin 2000, 66–67) – where free and equal individuals compete for their share of goods within a rational and fair bargain, and where this procedure in itself secures that the outcome cannot be unjust, we will find the same violation of community within liberal contractualism as we find on the market. Thus, just as marketeers, so liberal contracteers violate community, but not necessarily in the same way or to the same extent. Unlike free markets, a liberal contractualist procedural account of justice is not satisfied merely by free entry and bargaining efficiency. Still, it aims for a much more demanding account of fairness, in terms of eliminating background injustices and levelling the playing field to secure fairness in the bargain. But in the sense of how to perceive of the relationship between contracteers, the analogy is fitting. We need the social contract with its fair procedure, according to liberals, because the selfish nature of humans is so pervasive that it will otherwise make justice an impossible ideal. Just institutions, within liberal contractualism, are the result of a hypothetical procedure wherein the individual person uses her rational powers to make intrapersonal bindings upon herself, from which she extends her moral entitlements and obligations to others like her. Where liberal contractualism is in that sense intrapersonal, the value of community is fundamentally interpersonal. Hence, there is a stark contrast here

between the liberal contractualist view on humanity and the one expressed by Cohen's communal caring, although they are both ascribed to human persons as part of their nature and therefore preceding justice.

Whereas liberal contractualism ascribes a reasonably thin account of morality to human nature as the relevant conditions for living together as equals, Cohen's socialism requires a thicker view. The morality of being human, on Cohen's account, is not satisfied with being impartial, respecting others' autonomy, and identifying equal moral commitments and entitlements, it explicitly demands caring for fellow humans, and that this caring serves as a central purpose within one's projects. It should, therefore, be of central moral importance for any human person living in a community how well the lives of others in her community are going. This communally binding morality is already, preceding any instance of distributive justice, required as part of what it means to be a human among other humans.

Thus understood, the camping trip in *Why Not Socialism?* can be interpreted as a thought experiment designed to explore the relationship between distributive justice and community but also serves to investigate basic human morality in a state of nature, and from this investigation criticize the view of humanity underlying liberal theory. One obvious, and non-trivial, way to give body to this critique invokes Marx's alienation. His writings commonly distinguish between at least four forms of alienation (Marx 1982, 12–19): (i) *objectification*, where the worker is being alienated from the product of labor as he "puts his life into the object, and his life then belongs no longer to himself but to the object"; (ii) *coercion*, as the worker is alienated from the process of labor production, since "his work is not voluntary but imposed, *forced labour*. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a *means* for satisfying other needs". These two forms of alienation are related to the labor production. Here, the worker becomes, as famously put by Marx and Engels in the manifest, "an appendage of the machine" (Marx and Engels 2002). The last two forms of alienation relate to persons as members of the human species. Here we can distinguish between (iii) *dehumanization*, as the worker in making his labor a means only to acquire necessities not only alienates himself from his labor but by the same token is alienated from the whole human species since, "in the type of life activity resides the whole character of a species, its species-character; and free, conscious activity is the species-character of human beings"; and finally (iv) *nonsocialization*, as the worker no longer sees others primarily as peers, friends or compatriots but as competitors and trading partners. Hence, "a direct

consequence of the alienation of man from the product of his labour, from his life activity and from his species-life, is that *man is alienated from other men*".

The last form of alienation – nonsocialization – gives body to the critique of contractualist justice involved in Cohen's socialism through communal caring. We can borrow this point from one of Cohen's less known (and unfinished) works, in which he claims that to live with others without realizing their innate equal status "is to commit the sin of demeaning one's own humanity", thereby expressing that in so doing, one is alienated from one's natural humanity (Cohen 2013a). The Marxist point of alienation brings to the community principle that being human, essentially, requires a certain way of living together with others as equals, where being equals is thicker than the liberal impartial respect for individual autonomy, but also requires caring for others out of the fundamental moral acknowledgment that their humanity is the same humanity as one's own.

Upon these reflections, we can sum up the third role of community in Cohen's thought. In addition to being independently valuable and being constitutively related to egalitarian justice, community plays the part as a critique of the view of humanity provided by liberal contractualism. The inherent critique of liberal contractualism, we conjecture, is inspired by Marxist ideas about alienation, and while it is often overlooked in discussions on Cohen's philosophy, and not exclusive to Cohen's writings, it does play a central role in his socialism. Note that due to the importance of liberal contractualism for Cohen's theorizing on distributive justice, the community critique of contractualist justice also infringes upon Cohen's luck egalitarianism. But where it pertains to a fundamental critique of *liberal theory* (because of liberalism's insistence on a thin rational, self-interested view of humanity), the community critique, when turned against Cohen's own luck egalitarianism, serves merely to elaborate the complexity of the underlying value pluralism in Cohen's writing, and thereby restricting the scope of egalitarian justice as well as committing on a thicker moral account of humanity. While this certainly contributes to the complexity of the relationship between justice and community, it does not necessarily involve any inconsistency.

Conclusion

In exploring Cohen's community, which is an important part of his vision of socialism, we have identified that the content of the community principle is threefold: It has a motivational element, a justificatory element and two variations of communal caring: one

concerning motivation and one concerning an ability to relate to the experiences and challenges of others. Moreover, we have argued that community plays three distinct roles in Cohen's work. First, it is an independent socialist value including both basic moral equality and subjective endorsement of communal reciprocity. Second, community is a necessary adjacent counterpart to socialist justice both restricting and constitutive of distributive equality. Third and finally, community holds an inherent critique of the liberal contractualist view of human nature. To understand Cohen's socialism in detail, we should acknowledge these elements of community and the different roles community plays in his writings. We have argued that while the value of community and its relation to distributive justice are certainly complex, the different elements can be combined in one coherent socialist position. This socialism acknowledges the independent value of community as living together as equals, it explains well the complex but possible and feasible relationship between community and justice through the egalitarian ethos, and it offers a plausible alternative to the liberal contractualist view of humanity. We conclude that the elaboration of community in Cohen's writings binds together the central elements of his socialism to make it a strong contender for a leading contemporary political ideology.

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