

10th Anniversary Conference of the Association for Heterodox Economics

4-6 July, 2008

Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge

**Cohen's interpretation of Rawls' theory of justice:  
an integration of mainstream in welfare economics**

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Abstract

The paper discusses the relation between welfare economics and heterodoxy in social sciences, and it argues that Rawls' *Theory of Justice* is sufficiently general to integrate mainstream economics. For doing so, it assesses Cohen's interpretation of Rawls. The current debate in welfare economics can be traced back to the publication of *A Theory of justice* by Rawls in 1971. It was extended with the 1979 Sen's conference "Equality of What?". The debates turned on what to equalize, and an additional discussion would be about what to be done for achieving such equality. This is the issue of the internal critique of Rawls by the philosopher G.A. Cohen, both on the basic structure and on the difference principle. First, Cohen discusses Rawls on the object to which the principles of justice apply, namely the basic structure. His critique turns to the distinction between rights and virtue, which does not appear in Rawls, who restricts the basic structure to the legal structure. For Cohen, it should include informal norms and individual choices as well. Then, Cohen discusses the difference principle, a general principle of justice to apply to the basic structure, and he criticizes the issue of incentives on which it is based, according to Rawls. The latter did not demonstrate that inequalities, even if they are incentive, are fair. For Cohen, if a society is based on the difference principle, including brotherhood and dignity, talented people would not need incentives.

Keywords : Basic Structure, Inequalities, Justice, Welfare

JEL : D63, I31

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Draft version. Please ask before quotation

During the period when Rational Choice Marxism developed and when Analytical Marxism became a school of thought, Cohen gave up historical materialism. He refuted it gradually, first in terms of logical consistency in the first half of the 1980s, and then in empirical terms, based on the transformation of the class structure, the dislocation of the USSR, or the environmental crisis. Then, he attempted to preserve Marx's theory with the help of the self-ownership concept in the second half of the 1980s, before giving up again, in the mid-1990s. Such a theoretical move led it to concentrate more and more his research towards Rawlsian and post-Rawlsian political philosophy.

His aim, at that stage, was not anymore to analyze and to criticize the working of the incumbent structure in order to display perspectives for the future, but rather to build normative theories in order to describe this working as it should be. Still, it is noteworthy that his approach enters the current evolutions in political philosophy. From a questioning on sovereignty, power, law, it gradually concentrated on an analysis of justice, freedom, community, which corresponds to Kantian philosophy. Old discussions are dealt with under a new perspective and, in any case, traditional categories are disrupted. For Cohen, such a preference is based on the denial of the relativist claim, traditionally assigned to the Marxists, that it is inconsistent to argue on what is a good or a just society, if the claim is made independently of its background.

The intellectual move taken by Cohen corresponds to a step back to a pre-Marxist type of socialism, which is comparable with utopian socialism. For Marx and Engels, the main feature of utopian socialism is its undialectical character. The utopian socialists, including Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen, propose universal moral values, which are neither contextual nor historical. It denies that the reason which is accepted as rational by individuals at a given time is socially constructed. Therefore, utopian socialism corresponds to a kind of Kantian social critique, namely a pre-Hegelian one. Max Horkheimer [1973], who was part of the Frankfurt school, was criticizing Kant's theory for not accounting that men are constrained by the social organization of their interactions, and then for being imperialist.

The contemporary debate in political philosophy turns around several interpretations of justice, and the issue of the debate can be summarized with the following principles: to each according to his/her rights, to each according to what he/she deserves, to each according to what he/she needs. Cohen enters the debate with an original contribution, under the protection of Kant's theory. Together with logical problems that he assigned to Marx's theory, some empirical facts, including the supposed disintegration of the working class, led Cohen to assume that the aim of social transformation must rest upon normative foundations, within political philosophy. It is the reason why he redirected his research around Rawls's work.

*Having spent (what I hope will turn out to be only) the first third of my academic career devoting myself to exploring the ground and character [of historical materialism], I find myself, at the end of the (putative) second third of my career, engaged by philosophical questions about equality that I would earlier have thought do not require investigation, from a socialist point of view. [1995a: p. 7]*

From the early seventies to the first half of the eighties, he analyzed historical materialism, then until the mid-nineties, he worked on the concept of self-ownership, before specifically looking into normative political philosophy. In publishing *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* in 1999, Cohen became an important actor in the egalitarian debate in political philosophy, even if he started to grasp these issues as soon as the late eighties, and all along the nineties [1988-1989, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1994, 1995b, 1995c, 1997], and he posits himself as an internal critique of Rawls's philosophy. First, it seems that his approach applies the Kantian imperatives more systematically than Rawls does (1). Then, his critique to Rawls is more specifically based on the difference principle and on its counterpart on the incentives justification (2). Finally his critique moved him from a post-Rawlsian interpretation to a Christian one (3).

### **1. On the basic structure : institutions and personal choice, Cohen more Kantian than Rawls**

Without its Marxist foundation, Cohen's philosophy got directed to Kant's, besides Rawls's. The Rawlsian approach is based on a Kantian philosophy, in particular in resorting to categorical imperatives. The difference between the two turns on the basic structure and Cohen attempts to "re-kantianize" Rawls in redefining it and in stressing the need for an egalitarian individual philosophy. However, it is only Kantian in a general and arbitrary meaning, and Cohen proposes an interpretation

which he takes as closer to Kant in detail. He claims that the difference principle must apply not only to rights but also to virtue (1.1), which leads to a critique of Rawls for being conservative (1.2).

### ***1.1. Coercive structure, informal structure and action: Cohen's contribution on virtue***

A central point in the critique of Rawls by Cohen turns around the object to which the principles of justice must apply, namely the basic structure. Yet the distinction between right and virtue which is proposed by Kant does not appear in Rawls's. On that issue we will display two central features in his critique. On the one hand, the notion of basic structure raises practical issues, as far as the ambiguity of the concept is concerned (1.1.1). On the other hand, against Rawls's holism, Cohen gives a central role to the individual behaviours, even if he does not advocate methodological individualism(1.1.2).

#### *1.1.1. The basic structure, an ambiguous notion*

Cohen displays some ambiguities on what are the elements which make up the basic structure. For Rawls, it consists of a set of institutions to which the principles of justice are supposed to apply. Cohen criticizes such a specification of the basic structure as inadequate; he claims that a theory of justice does not fit if it restricts it to the legislative structure in which people act, without taking their actions into account. For Rawls [1971], the aim on any social system is to achieve a just distribution, whatever the circumstances are. The objection of Cohen to Rawls is that he is founded on a purely coercive specification, and then a arbitrary one, of the basic structure. Cohen breaks down the social structure in a coercive structure and a non coercive structure, and more precisely he attributes four sets of elements to the basic structure: "*the coercive structure, other structures<sup>2</sup>, the social ethos<sup>3</sup>, and the choices of individuals*" [1997: 26] On the one hand, a coercive structure displays the limits beyond which the persons cannot act unless being legally sanctioned, and it lets people informed on the effects of what they do. On the other hand, a non coercive structure does not lead to any formal and legal ban, but it displays some informal

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<sup>2</sup> They are the extra-legal structures.

<sup>3</sup> He defines the ethos of a society as "*the set of sentiments and attitudes in virtue of which its normal practices, and informal pressures, are what they are*" [1999: 145].

things that correspond to a ban (critiques, disapprovals, lack of cooperation, violence...). The informal structure corresponds to the way the social relations are organized in terms on non legal interactions. It includes distinctions between social categories, sex, ethnic categorizations, differences in terms of status, and it determines specific patterns of social behaviour. It results from recurrent behaviours that are based on informal norms, rules and conventions, that are not implemented by state institutions, and it allows to distinguish accepted behaviours from deviant ones. It is an independent factor in the distribution of social costs and benefits.

### *1.1.2. Cohen beyond the structure*

Cohen stresses not only the coercive structure – both legal and informal – but also the individual behaviours and the personal choices within this structure. Therefore, the level of justice in a society is not only a function of its coercive structure, but also of personal choice of individuals within such rules, and a just society, in the sense of the difference principle, requires not only coercive rules, but also a personal ethos, that is a conception of justice, for individual choices<sup>4</sup>. In the absence of such choices, that are supposedly based on the advocacy of a fairer distribution, inequalities that are unnecessary for improving the situation of the disadvantaged will persist, which contradicts the difference principle. Therefore justice requires an individual ethos beyond the obedience to rules and to norms, to coercive and informal structures, even if they are just. *“An ethos which informs choices within just rules is necessary in a society committed to the difference principle”* [Cohen, 1999: 132]. On that issue, in separating the personal choices and the legal structure<sup>5</sup>, Cohen is more Kantian than Rawls, since Kant [1996] traces a distinction between law and morality.

On the one hand, Rawls resorts to Kantian-type categorical imperative, but it is not only an imperative in legal terms. On the other hand, it is also, for Cohen, an imperative in terms of virtue, insofar as individual actions, together with the informal structure of society, have, as they are defined, no legal framework. To include such behaviours within the basic structure corresponds to the claim that every individual

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<sup>4</sup> A society which is founded exclusively on the coercive structure, in which the choice of individuals have no effect, is totalitarian.

<sup>5</sup> *“According to Kant, the same moral principles fit to both essential areas of human practice, virtue and law, but are differently applied”* [Höffe, 1988: 65, personal translation].

behaviour can be submitted to judgments in terms of justice. Consider the following alternative: either Rawls restricts justice to the coercive legal order, or he admits that the principles of justice shall be applied to all social behaviours and to personal choices that are not determined by the law. In the first case, Rawls arbitrarily restricts its object study; in the second case, he fails in his attempt to restrict the justice to the structure. He judges the structure and not the actions. In any case, his interpretation equates the basic structure and the coercive legal structure. Yet Cohen charges Rawls for not being sufficiently precise on that point, in the sense that a narrow elaboration such it was presented previously is considered as arbitrary since effects on the individuals are not only exerted by the coercive legal structure. Then the principles should apply both to coercive– formal and informal – and non coercive orders, and to the individual choices and behaviours.

### ***1.2. The basic structure objection: Rawls's conservatism***

The Rawlsian difference principle lays open a potential contradiction between the achievement of this principle and the behaviour of utility maximizing by rational individuals, since it might be the case that such maximizing individuals do not agree with the difference principle. Therefore this principle may not be strictly applicable to the basic structure of a society, institutionally speaking. In Cohen's analysis, the individual wears a major role, even if he cannot be presented as methodological individualist (1.2.1). He inserts the individual in a larger issue around the culture of justice (1.2.2).

#### *1.2.1. Cohen: the individual without methodological individualism*

What is personal is political: for Cohen, the personal choices for which law gives no information are crucial for social justice. In a just coercive structure, it might be the case that an injustice in distribution corresponds to personal choices, and it raises the issue of individual responsibility. As a result, Cohen proposes the assumption that the principles of justice must apply not only to coercive rules, but also to the individual choices that are not under legal constraint. Moreover, only choices that are voiced by people, whether they are individual or collective, may allow an evolution in the coercive legal structure. Thus Cohen charges Rawls for radical holism because he “retreats to coercive structure” [1997: 21], for conservatism, and “the view that [he]

*oppose[s] is the Rawlsian one that principles of justice apply only to what Rawls calls the 'basic structure' of society" [1997: 4].*

Then the choices of the persons become a consistent standard for judging if a society is just or not, and it is necessary to analyze which standards of judgment may be given to the individuals. On the one hand, it is not possible to generalise one's own philosophical posture, on the other hand, the possibility of passing judgments on individual actions is not straightforwardly a philosophical issue. However, stressing the responsibility of individuals does not necessarily correspond to the approval of an argument in terms of methodological individualism. It also may correspond to overtake the opposition between holism and individualism. Individual choices are inserted within a set of social practices and they can be judged as such; they are socially conditioned, so that it can be costly for an individual to deviate from the social norms. Thus, it does not make sense to analyse an individual behaviour or a social structure on an independent basis, and neither methodological individualism nor methodological holism are consistent as such. Individuals act according to what they judge to be their interest, under – legal and informal – constraints that are determined by a given social structure.

Now, it is noteworthy to keep in mind that Cohen proposes two meanings for the term "*Analytical*" in "*Analytical Marxism*": a broad meaning, as opposed to "*dialectical*", and a narrow sense, as opposed to "*holist*" [2000: xxii-xxiii]. In his debate with Elster in the early eighties<sup>6</sup>, Cohen charged the latter for stressing too much that narrow analytical aspect. Two decades later, he had come closer with Elster, since he judges that "*a micro-analysis is always desirable and always in principle possible*" [2000: xxiii, stress in the original]. Yet, he does not straightforwardly advocate a methodological individualist approach. He is neither only concerned with the structure in which the choices are specified, whether it is coercive or informal, nor with a set of individual choices, but with the pattern of interactions between structure and choice, what he refers to as "*distributive justice*" [1997, p. 3]. His conclusion is that if they are analyzed independently from each other, structure and choice wear a secondary importance in the determination of distributive justice, if the circumstances which make the pattern divert through

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<sup>6</sup> See Cohen 1982, Elster 1982

chance are not taken into account. Now the point is restore the alternative between choice and chance.

### *1.2.2. Basic structure and culture of justice*

Cohen admits that his mainstream Marxist background led him, when he was young, to despise any kind of advocacy or justification of the inequalities. He displays two kinds of defence: a “normative” defence which approves inequalities and considers them as just, and a “factual” defence which does not deny that inequalities are unjust but which claims that it is too costly to delete them. Now, entering a Rawlsian-kind structure, he claims that the principles of distributive justice must also apply to choice that are not under legal obligation. Then distributive justice is not only concerned with social rules, but it is also a question of attitude and of personal choice, and the justice of a society would not only depend on the coercive legal structure, but also on the individual choices that are made within that structure. The latter would then be led by a culture of justice that each individual would be endowed with, and without which inequalities that are harmful to the improvement of the disadvantaged would persist. He claims that such a culture is necessary for two reasons that are related, on the one hand, to the impossibility to implement egalitarian rules that can be confirmed and, on the other hand to the problems that would be raised if those rules should be followed at any price. It would be unpalatable to limit the basic structure and the application of the principles of justice to the legal coercive structure; they also should apply, through an egalitarian ethos, to the choices and behaviours of individuals in that basic structure. The principles of justice should then correspond to the individuals’ behaviours that are not legally constrained. Since it is not possible to apply the difference principle on an individual basis, they should be inspired by an egalitarian philosophy, for instance by the principle of difference, which corresponds to a generous behaviour from the richest to the poorest.

For Cohen any society should be endowed with a culture of justice in order to implement the difference principle, so that the most talented persons would not demand high wages. Then there must be a correspondence between personal ethos and informal structure. It is the reason why Cohen proposes a social ethos rather than an egalitarian one. However he assumes an explanatory primacy to the individual choices, in the sense that *“people do have choices: it is, indeed, only their choices*



*that reproduce social practices*” [1999: 143, stress in the original], and that only individual choices may modify the informal social structure, which is considered as given beforehand. This is the sense in which Cohen moves the political theory from an institutional approach based on the legal structure to an interactional approach based on behaviours, actions and interactions of individuals and groups of individuals. With such an interpretation, it cannot be the case that Rawls is more conservative than Cohen. In including virtue to the basic structure, Cohen broadens the Rawlsian problematics to the individual, without defending an methodological individualist approach.

## **2. A critique of the difference principle and of the incentives justification**

Another critique by Cohen is not related to the basic structure, but to the difference principle, namely a general principle of justice which is supposed to apply to the basic structure. The difference principle is based on an approval of the inequalities if they benefit the disadvantaged. Therefore, even if the egalitarian authors allow very few credit to the assumption that the inequalities can benefit the disadvantaged, they do not deny that they would accept them if it was the case, and Cohen “*ha[s] no quarrel with the principle itself but... in [his] view, there is hardly any serious inequality that satisfies the requirement set by the difference principle*” [1999: 124]. He elaborates a critique on the issue of the incentives which, for Rawls, justify some degree of inequality. Then the difference principle, together with the assumption of an incentive principle, advocates factually inequalities, and it wears some contradictions (2.1). Some ambiguities appear between the difference principle and the notion of solidarity which is supposed to be included within that principle (2.2).

### **2.1. An advocacy of inequalities on the name of incentives**

On the one hand, the egalitarians that we may call socialists wonder about equality in absolute terms, but not in relative terms. They are concerned with unnecessary misery, and equality would be desirable in the sense that it would improve the condition of the disadvantaged, and they have no consideration for the deterioration of the condition of the richest. On the other hand, the difference principle favours inequality insofar as it allows an improvement in the condition of the disadvantaged. He opposes then to a straightforward equality. Under circumstances where there are disadvantaged persons, an egalitarian could advocate the difference principle, since it

could clear the social inequalities. Therefore, the notion of equality moved from a premise to a result. The difference principle raises various contradictions on that issue. Such an advocacy of inequalities is rather factual than normative (2.1.1) and Cohen judges that the principle has no substantial content that can have a concrete implementation (2.1.2).

### *2.1.1. A factual defence of inequalities*

For Rawls, an inequality is justified when it improves the conditions of the disadvantaged. A widespread interpretation of that claim proposes that material incentives, when associated with an economic inequality, have a positive impact on the motivation for production. This argument can be seen as a possible interpretation of the difference principle, and it can be used for advocating a fall in the taxation of the richest. The argument goes as follows. The major normative premise claims that economic inequalities are justified when they benefit the disadvantaged. The major factual premise claims that when the taxation level is low, then the richest – who are considered, by definition, as the richest – are more productive. As a result, a greater amount of wealth would be available for the redistribution, and opportunities for employment would appear to the poorest. Incentives that allow inequalities would then be justified because they improve the situation of the poorest. Therefore, a public policy which aims to improve the condition of the disadvantaged should make the taxation on the richest fall, since the situation is more favourable to the poorest than in a more equal society. A policy like the ones which were implemented by the British and the American governments in the early eighties could then be based on the difference principle<sup>7</sup>. However, this argument rests on the assumptions that the preferences are selfish and that the richest have a strategic behaviour. Inequalities are then necessary only if those persons decide to produce less in case of a fall in the inequalities. Yet, what seems to be a normative defence of the inequalities is indeed a factual defense. Rawls does not prove that an inequality is just if it leads to incentives, he only claims that it cannot be avoided. A first element in the critique is a question of definition: Rawls claims that the richest are the most talented, but being more talented is not equivalent of being able to earn a higher income. The only valuable claim is that those people are in such a condition that they can demand a higher

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<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that such policies are also encouraged by a libertarian approach like Nozick's.

wage, and that they can modulate their productivity around such an income. Yet, it can be allowed that their position results from random circumstances, which contradicts the Rawlsian assumption that all have the same opportunities. “*The incentives argument for inequality represents a distorted application of the difference principle*” [Cohen, 1999, p. 126].

### *2.1.2. A useless principle*

One of Cohen’s critiques to Rawls rests upon the assumption that in a society which is entirely<sup>8</sup> based on the difference principle, and then characterized by brotherhood and dignity, the most talented will not need the incentives, and the expected outcome will not occur. The incentives argument is not necessary for the difference principle if the persons accept that principle and then, incentives that aim to justify it must be based out of the community. The difference principle amounts to the claim that any inequality is justified if it benefits the disadvantaged. Yet it is barely possible to demonstrate that clearing an inequality does not benefit the disadvantaged, this is why it is difficult to justify an inequality in the name of that principle. Then, whether an inequality can benefit the disadvantaged depends on the constraints that are related to the incumbent unequal structures. Therefore, inequalities can be seen as attractive for the disadvantaged only if the incumbent structures are unequal. The difference principle is based on an implicit solidarity between the various categories of the population, and its implementation requires some degree of homogeneity and of social cohesion. In order to preserve justice, Rawls advocates “*an institutional division of labour*” [2001: 54] between individuals and associations, within which everyone is free to act as he wishes. Besides, it is assumed that the persons will not have more advantages except if it benefits to disadvantaged. Yet it is not compatible with Rawls’s assumption that individuals are maximizers. For Cohen [1995: 179], the claim to have no more advantages unless if the disadvantaged benefit from them is ambiguous.

### **2.2. Difference principle and individual behaviour**

The fact that the individual is missing in the Rawlsian basic structure, as it appears in Cohen’s critique, does not mean that it is missing in the whole model. Under Cohen’s

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<sup>8</sup> This corresponds to the four elements in the basic structure that were previously introduced.

interpretation, it might be possible to establish connections between a defence of the difference principle and the integration of the individual in the analysis. Notwithstanding what is implicit in the analysis, solidarity is not assumed by the difference principle (2.2.1), and the interpretation of this principle is based on the place which is given to the individuals; for Cohen, it requires a culture of justice (2.2.2).

### *2.2.1. The lack of a connexion between the difference principle and solidarity*

Contrary to what it seems to assume implicitly, the difference principle is not necessarily compatible with solidarity. Then a critique is directed on the factual premise of the argument, which leads to the conclusion that the richest would be more productive if they pay less tax. Such a claim has no justification, and it is necessary to prove the conditions why the richest, even under the assumption that they are the most talented, would be more productive if they pay less tax. What the persons do depends on the reasons why they are doing it. They improve either their capacity to work, or their willing to work. Under the first assumption, this means that the richest must have a higher consumption in order to be more productive, which is not likely. Actually what is modified is their cost-benefit alternative. Under the second assumption, a lowering of the taxation for the richest would lead to lessen their reluctance to work. Yet, individual welfare is not only a material issue, and it is not the only thing which is rational to be interested in. Thus, if a monetary inequality disappears, it could be the case that individuals tend to replace it with another inequality. There can be a whole set of non monetary motivations, like status inequalities [Roemer, 1982]. However, the incentives argument, even if it might be presented as a cooperative behaviour for the richest, is firstly the proof of a lack of solidarity towards the fellow members of a community, and this leads to deny the brotherhood assumption which is presented by Rawls. If the members of a society would accept the difference principle, no incentive would be necessary.

### *2.2.2. Difference principle and culture of justice*

Rawls implies that, in a just society, people are endowed with a sense of justice, which corresponds to the fact that they are free and equal. However, nothing guarantees such a behaviour, since individuals are assumed to be only motivated by their own interest. Besides, beyond such a contradiction, such a sense of justice appears

explicitly in Cohen's redefinition, whereas it is only implicit in Rawls. Rawls and Cohen both care about the existence of a culture of justice, even if not on the same explanatory level and, as a result, they agree that the value that must be privileged in political philosophy is solidarity rather than equality.

According to the function which is given to the individual will, the difference principle may be allowed various interpretations. On the one hand, in a straightforward one, which is Rawls's, inequalities are only necessary when they are independent from individual intentions. On the other hand, a broader interpretation, like Cohen's, includes the demands that are related to such behaviours. The claim that the inequalities cannot improve the condition of the poorest unless we assume a maximizing behaviour from the richest, stems from a broader interpretation of the difference principle. A straightforward interpretation rests upon the implicit assumption that the persons are attached to a conception of justice which is based on the difference principle, since everyone accepts such principles of justice and knows that everyone else accepts them too [Rawls, 1980: 521]. Such a conception shall then have an influence on people's motivation. The mutual support between persons is then necessary for the difference principle.

For Cohen [1992 : 314], "*justice is itself a compromise or balance between self-interest and the claims of equality*". This is how the difference principle requires a culture of justice, an ethos. Cohen "*believe[s] that a just society is normally impossible without one*" [1992: 315]. The conjunction of the defence of individual interests with the currency of the social justice would then be fortuitous. An egalitarian ethos would result in that the request to have a conscious concern to the disadvantaged is useless, since it amounts to internalize that concern. This allows to replace the posture of mutual indifference as it is assumed in the original position. On the one hand, nobody knows which behaviour the individuals will choose within their interactions. On the other hand, that mutual indifference is not compatible with the brotherhood values that are advocated by Rawls. Therefore, the broad interpretation which is presented by Cohen is more cautious than Rawls's, but it is not fundamentally based on social justice, and it requires just individual behaviours. Then, Rawls must give up either the incentives for the richest to exert their talent, or the brotherhood ideals. Cohen "*think[s] the ideals are worth keeping* » [1992: 322].

Their absence in the Rawlsian theoretical background leads Cohen to give it up for taking an individual interpretation rather than a social one, and he resorts then to religious texts.

### **3. From a social revolution to a moral revolution**

*Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is, necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary. [Marx, 1968]*

Such is the materialist foundation of the Marxian approach, and Cohen then proposes the opposite claim. It is the last step of his intellectual path. After giving up Marx's theory of history, and the possibility to defend a Marxian approach on self-ownership, he came closer to Rawls's approach, before rejecting it in favour of an acceptance of the social Christian thought. For Cohen, Rawlsian philosophical tools cannot be used for defending socialism (3.1), and this critique, instead of taking him back to scientific socialism, turns him to Christian metaphysics (3.2).

#### **3.1. The impossibility of a Rawlsian advocacy of socialism**

Still, the conditions for implementing in a Rawlsian way the principles and institutions that were favoured by Marx and Engels are very restrictive. In the plausible assumption that it is impossible for "free and equal citizens" to rationally choose socialism, the only possibility to achieve socialism from the original position is that this position is based on the dictatorship of the proletariat. As a matter of fact, under a context of class antagonism and of rule of the bourgeoisie, the latter is allowed to display its interests as the interests of the whole humanity. It is the reason why a Rawlsian procedure can only implement the principles of socialism as institutions after a revolution replaced the bourgeois society with a proletarian rule. For Marx and Engels, any abstract concept must be analyzed under the light of class struggle, and it is nothing else than a bourgeois concept abstractly presented as universal.

*The categories of bourgeois economy... are forms of thought expressing with social validity the conditions and relations of a definite, historically determined mode of production, viz., the production of commodities. The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour as long as they take the form of commodities, vanishes therefore, so soon as we come to other forms of production. [Marx, 1887]*

Reason in a bourgeois society corresponds to ideal rule of the bourgeoisie, to the eternal right to the bourgeois justice, equality is the equality of the bourgeoisie in front of the law, ownership is held by the bourgeoisie, the social contract corresponds to the bourgeois democratic republic... Here Cohen, together with Rawls, replaces class struggle with a theory of moral acceptability, so that socialism and communism could only be implemented if any individual rationally identifies the proletariat as the bearer of the future of humanity, so that no Rawlsian device can support the possibility to go towards socialism. Finally, rather than a social approach in terms of class struggle, Cohen advocates an individualist egalitarianism.

### ***3.2. Towards a Christian interpretation of the possibility of social transformation***

*So this is my aim: to explore the theme of egalitarian justice and history, and of justice in state-imposed structure and in personal choice, in a fashion that brings together topics in Marxism, issues in recent political philosophy, and standing preoccupations in Judeo-Christian thought. [Cohen, 1999, p. 4]*

As far as his approach on the Rawlsian philosophy is concerned, together with the critique that Cohen intends to it, he is led to wonder about convictions, namely the visible contradictions between the convictions and the personal situation. He seems to be puzzled by the development of a social ethos and of a culture of justice such that it might be the case that a rich individual has egalitarian convictions<sup>9</sup>. It is the reason why his latest book is entitled *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*. Cohen's aim is not the collective ownership of the means of production anymore, but equality, and he intends to display the means for achieving it. After leaving Marx, first in refuting historical materialism, and then definitely in refuting the possibility for self-ownership to defend him, after leaving Rawls for being excessively holist, Cohen got obliged, for not being presented as a defender of the current rule and then a conservative, to shift his approach towards metaphysical explanations.

In a sense, it can be claimed that Cohen's posture is a Rawlsian one, insofar as its formal presentation is similar to Rawls's, that is compatible with the market economy. However, it is different in terms of substantial content, since Cohen pretends to advocate some kind of socialism. By the way, his approach is not

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<sup>9</sup> It is noteworthy that such an approach relates to a non scientific interpretation of the capitalist social structure, for which class position is equated with wealth.

incompatible with an interpretation in terms of market socialism. Yet, the way socialism is implemented here is neither to grasp the power through a social and political revolution, like in Marx's, nor to adjust the coercive legal structure through universal suffrage as it could be in Rawls's. It would rather be a moral revolution for each individual, since the implementation of any moral principle should be submitted to an approval by all, should have been built within an original position, and should be daily enforced. For Marx, normative principles are powerless to achieve social transformation: if it is based on the reason of rational and disembodied individuals who are able to select within a set of ideal societies, it has very few possibilities to succeed against the coercive and ideological weapons of capitalism. Cohen admits explicitly that he moved closer to the Christian social thought:

*This nostrum says that, for inequality to be overcome, there needs to be a revolution in feeling or motivation, as opposed to (just) in economic structure. I do not know think that just plain true, but I think there is more truth in it than I was prepared to recognize. [1999, p. 120]*

His aim shifted then from a collective revolution based on the proletarian dictatorship to an individual revolution based on religious principles. Primacy in the historical explanation is neither given to the productive forces, as it was the case in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, nor to the relations of production or to the class struggle, but to the individual behaviours of the agents. Yet nothing proves that an individual revolution is more rational or easier to achieve than a collective revolution, and the proofs given by Cohen to demonstrate that both the collective revolutionary potential of the working class disappeared and dialectical materialism failed, are not really satisfactory. Rather than a critique to Rawls, Cohen's approach is a critique to Marx, in defence of the Christian social theory.

*I would indeed have been shocked to foresee, when I was, say, in my twenties, that I was to come to the point where I am now. For the three forms of egalitarian doctrine [Rawlsian, Marxian, Christian] that I have distinguished can in one dimension be so ordered that my present view falls at the opposite end to the Marxist view with which I began. [Cohen, 1999 : 3]<sup>10</sup>*

## CONCLUSION

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<sup>10</sup> We can synthesize such a move with the dual observation that the foreword of his first book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* is Marx's Preface of *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, and that the last sentence of his last book, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* [1999, p. 181], is taken from Gospel of Mark (chapter 8, verse 36): "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul".



After refuting historical materialism, Cohen entered the debate in normative political philosophy around the works of John Rawls. He gave up Marx's protection to get a Kantian one, besides Dworkin, Scalon, Sen... He then started to discuss the theory of justice and made an internal critique of Rawls's. His point has been to clarify the foundations of the Rawlsian theory, to discuss first the delimitation of the basic structure in integrating the individual behaviours and the incentive argument within the difference principle. He concluded that Rawls's theory is not able to advocate socialism, that such a defence must be made on an individual basis and, for that reason he turned to the Gospels and the Christian social thought. He finished this way his intellectual path and, instead of turning Marxism into mainstream economics, he abandoned Marxism for mainstream social thought.

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