



Socialism and Freedom

Capitalism

University of Virginia

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Contents

1. **G. A. Cohen**
2. Cohen's Critique of the Non-Consequentialist Freedom Argument
3. Cohen on the Unfreedom of the Proletariat
4. Consequentialist Freedom Arguments

G. A. Cohen



G. A. Cohen (1941-2009)

Famous analytical Marxist

Jewish-Canadian

Spent most of this life at the
University of Oxford

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The Central Issue

Claim “*if* what you value is freedom, as opposed, for example, to equality, then you should be in favor of an unmixed capitalist economy without a welfare sector.” (p. 148)

Often, the situation is interpreted as follows:

- ❑ **Libertarians:** value only liberty, or liberty above all
- ❑ **Liberals:** value liberty, but also equality; advocate a compromise between the two
- ❑ **Common Ground:** both accept that capitalism stands for maximum freedom

Cohen: **this is a mistake**. Capitalism is not, at least not by definition, the system of maximum freedom.

Two Definitions of Freedom

Neutral Definition	Rights Definition
I am unfree whenever someone interferes with my actions	I am unfree when someone prevents me from doing something that I have a right to do
The tent-pitcher is unfree under a capitalist system, because the land-owner/state interferes with them	The tent-pitcher is not unfree under a capitalist system, because they had no right to pitch their tent in the first place
The imprisoned criminal is unfree, because their ability to move freely is taken away	The imprisoned criminal is not unfree, because they have no right to move freely

Friedman's Argument

- (1) Freedom is being protected from coercion by others.
- (2) Capitalism is a society organized through voluntary exchange.
- (3) A society organized through voluntary exchange guarantees being protected from coercion by others.
- (4) Economic systems which are not organized through voluntary exchange do not guarantee being protected from coercion by others.
- (5) Justice requires being protected from coercion by others.
- (6) Justice requires a society organized through voluntary exchange.

Remember Friedman's Non-Consequentialist Argument (to the left). Let us simplify this argument a bit:

(C1) Freedom is absence of coercion.
(Definition of freedom)

(C2) Capitalism is the system of maximum freedom. (Non-consequentialist(!) claim)

(C3) We should choose the system of maximum freedom. (Normative claim)

Thus, we should choose capitalism.

Cohen argues against (C2), not (C3). His critique is based on an analysis of (C1), too.

Friedman's Argument, First Interpretation

(C1) Freedom is absence of interference by others (neutral definition).

(C2) Capitalism is the system of maximum absence of interference by others.

(C3) We should choose the system of maximum absence of interference by others.

Thus, we should choose capitalism.

Problems with this argument

(C2) is **not a priori true**. In capitalism, the poor are interfered with by the rich in a multiplicity of ways. E.g., I cannot pitch a tent in the rich man's garden.

Reply 1. It is wrong for the poor to pitch the tent in the rich man's garden. But: you cannot appeal to morality within a neutral definition of freedom.

Reply 2. (C2) is **a posteriori true**—after we have looked at the consequences of capitalism, it turns out to have the smallest amount of interference. But: then the argument is no longer non-consequentialist!

Friedman's Argument, Second Interpretation

(C1) Freedom is absence of interference by others within the sphere of one's rights (**rights definition**).

(C2) Capitalism is the system of maximum absence of interference by others within the sphere of one's rights.

(C3) We should choose the system of maximum absence of interference by others within the sphere of one's rights.

Thus, we should choose capitalism.

Problems with this argument

(C1) is implausible. It suggests that prisoners are not unfree.

(C2) is question-begging. (C2) is only true if you think that people have strong private property rights. But if that is not true, (C2) is not true. The socialists disagree on this very point.

Example: Imagine that Poor camps on Rich's property. Does this make Rich less free?

On the neutral definition of freedom? Yes.

On the rights definition of freedom? It depends. If you do not think that Rich has a right to exclude Poor, then No.

Questions

Imagine that someone makes the following argument,

- (1) Taxation is theft.
- (2) Theft is morally wrong.
- (3) Therefore, taxation is morally wrong.

Is this a good argument?

Upshots of Cohen's Criticism

- Cohen argues that defenders of capitalism operate with an ambiguous notion of freedom
- Cohen does **not** show that socialism is preferable, or more free than capitalism
- All he has shown so far is that **non-consequentialist arguments based on freedom rest on an error**
- Where do we go from here?
 - ❑ Option 1: Search for deeper, non-consequentialist foundations: **why do people have property rights?**
 - ❑ Option 2: Look for consequentialist arguments for capitalism

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Force and Freedom

- Cohen's Claim: **under capitalism, workers are forced to sell their labour.**
 - ❑ “When I am forced to do something I have **no reasonable or acceptable alternative course**. It need not be true that I have no alternative whatsoever.” (“The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom”, p. 4)
- A confusing second claim: **under capitalism, workers are free to sell their labour** (p. 147). The argument seems to be:
 1. If you are forced to do X, then you can do X.
 2. If you can do X, then you are free to X.
 3. Thus: if you are forced to do X, then you are free to do X.
- Can we make sense of the idea “**forced to do X, and free to do X**”?
 - ❑ Perhaps: proletarians are not impeded by anyone to sell their labour (= freedom), but they have no reasonable alternative to selling their labour (= being forced)
 - ❑ It's not clear whether much depends on this point, at any rate

Is the proletariat unfree?

- **Cohen's Claim:** under capitalism, **workers are unfree**, because they are forced to sell their wage labour.
- **Objection:** this is not true, as evidenced by the fact that some workers escape the proletariat.

Cohen's Analogies

- **Cohen's First Room Analogy.** A room with one door, which opens only once. There are ten people, and ten heavy keys. Each could carry the key to the door and open it. One person does.
- **Cohen's Second Room Analogy.** There are two doors, each of which opens only once. There are ten people, and ten heavy keys. One person opens one of the doors. No one attempts to open the second door.
 - ❑ Cohen: every *individual* in this case is free to leave.
 - ❑ Everyone is free, however, only on the condition that no one else uses their freedom
- **Cohen's Refined Claim:** under capitalism, the proletariat suffers from collective unfreedom (p. 161); it is an "imprisoned class" (p. 162).
 - ❑ Why do people not attempt to escape the proletariat? Difficulty of doing so, habituation, class solidarity.

Individuals and Collectives

- If Cohen is right, then freedom must be assessed on a collective level
- It would be a mistake to point at any single success story under capitalism
 - ❑ We must focus on workers as a class
 - ❑ We are not used to thinking collectively—maybe this gives an advantage to the defender of capitalism
- This might also have implications for how we interpret “being forced”
 - ❑ Directly, personally forced: someone interferes with you
 - ❑ Structurally, impersonally forced: the system is set up in a way that you never have certain opportunities

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Questions

How might one develop a consequentialist argument on the basis of freedom, for/against capitalism?

Such an argument would need to clarify:

- (1) There are certain consequences,
- (2) These consequences we can call individual freedoms and unfreedoms,
- (3) (Perhaps there are different kinds of freedom)
- (4) Empirically, capitalism can be expected to bring about a greater/smaller amount of total freedom

Formal and Effective Freedom

- Let us distinguish
 - ❑ **Formal freedom** = the degree to which others do not interfere with your plans
 - ❑ **Effective freedom** = the degree to which you can realise and pursue your plans
- In a consequentialist argument, we would need to look at
 - ❑ What are people formally free to do under different economic arrangements?
 - ❑ How much do people value what they are formally free to do under different economic arrangements?
 - ❑ What are people effectively free to do under different economic arrangements?
 - ❑ How much do people value what they are effectively free to do under different economic arrangements?
 - ❑ How do we weigh different freedoms, and different degrees across different people?

Course Components

	Standard Track	Research Track
Attendance	10% participation OR 10% book report (“shy option”) two unexcused absences maximum	
First Submission	25% literature essay (~2000 words, from prompt, due: October 10)	15% survey of literature (~2000 words, independent, due: November 1)
Second Submission November 14	30% take-home exam (10 questions, answer three, ~800 words each)	
Final Submission December 12	35% research essay (~3000 words)	45% research essay (~5000 words)
Reflections 2h before course	graded pass/fail, ~100 words, throughout term on Collab, miss maximum of 5	



Summary

- ❖ There are (at least!) two ways to define freedom—the neutral definition and the rights definition
- ❖ Cohen: on neither definition does it follow a priori that capitalism is the system of maximum freedom
- ❖ Cohen: proletarians under capitalism are not individually forced to sell their labour, but collectively they are
- ❖ If a freedom argument succeeds, it must be consequentialist, or refer to deeper philosophical foundations