

G. A. COHEN

If You're an Egalitarian,
How Come You're So Rich?



If You're an Egalitarian,
How Come You're So Rich?

G. A. COHEN

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, Massachusetts

London, England

Copyright © 2000 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College
All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Second printing, 2000

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Cohen, G. A. (Gerald Allan), 1941–

If you're an egalitarian, how come you're so rich? / G. A. Cohen.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-00218-0

1. Equality. 2. Distributive justice. 3. Social justice. 4. Communism.
5. Liberalism. 6. Religion and social problems. I. Title.

HM821.C64 2000

303.3'72—dc21

99-086974

If You're an Egalitarian,
How Come You're So Rich?

With gratitude to my beloved brother Michael

PREFACE

These are the Gifford Lectures of 1996. Before I had the opportunity to spend the month in Edinburgh during which I delivered them, I had heard and read a great deal about the architectural splendor of that city, but, having only glimpsed it for a day or two on a couple of hectic occasions, I had not experienced the truth of the praise it receives. Edinburgh is glorious, partly because of its grand buildings and its monuments, its parks and its hills, but also—and, for me, more so—because of the brilliantly conceived and faithfully maintained straight and curved terraces of the eighteenth-century New Town that lies to the north of Prince's Street. On the second evening of my lecturing engagement, full of good red wine from the cellar of the Roxburgh Hotel in Charlotte Square, where I was fortunate enough to be lodged, I treated myself to an after-dinner walk through the New Town's stately terraces, and at no other time in my life—not even in Oxford or Cambridge—have I been so enthralled by the eloquence of stone.

There is a certain incongruity between the sumptuous circumstances of the delivery of these lectures—the hotel, the wine, the lush sojourn in a handsome, wealthy (in the latitudes of it where I had occasion to move) city—and their egalitarian content. I am greatly preoccupied with that incongruity. It is a large part of what this book is about, and it helps to explain the book's title.

I focus here on Marxism and on Rawlsian liberalism, and I draw a connection between each of those thought-systems and the choices that shape the course of a person's life. In the case of Marxism, the relevant life is my own. For, as I have occasion to recount in Lecture 2, I was raised as a Marxist (and Stalinist communist) the way other people are raised Roman Catholic or Muslim. A strong socialist egalitarian doctrine was the ideological milk of my childhood, and my intellectual work has been an attempt to reckon with that inheritance, to throw out what

should not be kept and to keep what must not be lost. The impact of belief in socialism and equality on my own life is given some prominence in what follows.

In the case of Rawlsian doctrine, the relevant life is not mine in particular, but people's lives as such. For I argue, at some length, that egalitarian justice is not only, as Rawlsian liberalism teaches, a matter of the rules that define the structure of society, but also a matter of personal attitude and choice; personal attitude and choice are, moreover, the stuff of which social structure itself is made. These truths have not informed political philosophy as much as they should inform it, and I try to bring them to the fore in Lectures 8–10.

When Rosa Luxemburg wrote that “history . . . has the fine habit of always producing along with any real social need the means to its satisfaction, along with the task simultaneously the solution,” she was expressing a thought, descended from Hegel, that had lodged itself deeply in Marxist theory and practice. The proposition that, as Karl Marx himself put it, “mankind sets itself only such tasks as it can solve,” comforted and inspired Marxist thinkers and activists, but it was, I argue in Lectures 3–6, a disastrous mistake, one that bore a large responsibility for Marxism's failure in the twentieth century.

Because I shall labor to expose that failure, I consider it important to emphasize, at the outset of this book, two things—one personal and one political. The personal thing is that I remain unambivalently grateful to the people who ensured that my upbringing was Marxist, and I have in no measure abandoned the values of socialism and equality that are central to Marxist belief. The political thing is that the task which Marxism set itself, which is to liberate humanity from the oppression that the capitalist market visits upon it, has not lost its urgency. That goal is not less worth fighting for when we have forsaken the belief that history ensures that it will be accomplished.

Accordingly, while I shall oppose the fundamental Marxist conception that Luxemburg expressed with beguiling pungency, my opposition to it reflects no weakening of my commitment to socialism. Far from urging a reconsideration of socialist equality itself, I am engaged in rejecting Marxist (and Rawlsian) postures that seek to reduce the force of equality as a moral norm.

The last seven of the lectures presented here concern Marxism and liberalism. These are preceded by an opening lecture in which I provide an examination of the problematic issue of why we adhere to commitments which, like mine, are ones that we know originated in the contingencies of a particular upbringing: in my case, of the upbringing that I describe in Lecture 2.

The lectures appear here in a somewhat different form from the one in which they were delivered. The Prospectus, here presented separately, was originally part of Lecture 1; Lecture 7 (as readers will learn) could not be reproduced in print; and in the reworking of the lectures for publication, some have been substantially expanded—particularly so Lecture 10, which is less polished than the rest, and which remains open-ended.

My greatest Edinburgh debt is to Paul McGuire of the Faculty of Arts, who discharged a considerable organizational burden with diligence and grace. I also thank Marsha Caplan, who prepared handouts for the audience, often at short notice, and Ross Sibbald, who prepared the lecture hall and who ensured that entry into it and exit from it were appropriately uneventful. Finally, I am grateful to those who chaired the lectures: John Richardson, Ronald Hepburn, Carole Hillenbrand, Timothy Sprigge, Duncan Forrester, John O'Neill, Russell Keat, and Sir Stewart Sutherland.

Most of these lectures have reached their present form following superb criticism by many people. I apologize to those commentators whose names I failed to record for future mention, and I am happy to be able to thank Daniel Attas, John Baker, David Bakhurst, Jerry Barnes, Brian Barry, Paul Boghossian, Diemut Bubeck, Paula Casal, Joshua Cohen, Miriam Cohen Christofidis, Ronald Dworkin, Cécile Fabre, Margaret Gilbert, Keith Graham, Betsy Hodges, Susan Hurley, John McMurtry, Andrew Mason, Liam Murphy, Thomas Nagel, Michael Otsuka, Derek Parfit, Guido Pincione, Thomas Pogge, Joseph Raz, John Roemer, Amélie Rorty, Michael Seifert, Horacio Spector, Gopal Sreenivasan, Hillel Steiner, Christine Synnowich, Larry Temkin, Peter Vallentyne, Frank Vandembroucke, Robert Van der Veen, Alan Wertheimer, Martin Wilkinson, Andrew Williams, Bernard Williams, Erik Wright, and two anonymous Harvard referees. Apart from those referees, Paul Levy, David Miller, and Derek Parfit were the only people who read the whole thing;

their advice was invaluable. My most indefatigable and productive critic was, as always, Arnold Zuboff, with whom I spent many instructive (for me) hours debating most of the themes of the lectures.

Lindsay Waters has been a dream editor: I do not think anyone could have been more supportive. Maria Ascher improved the prose at many junctures. And those who know her will not be surprised by the size of the gratitude that I feel to my wife Michèle.

If You're an Egalitarian,
How Come You're So Rich?

CONTENTS

Preface	ix
Prospectus	1
1 Paradoxes of Conviction	7
2 Politics and Religion in a Montreal Communist Jewish Childhood	20
3 The Development of Socialism from Utopia to Science	42
4 Hegel in Marx: The Obstetric Motif in the Marxist Conception of Revolution	58
5 The Opium of the People: God in Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx	79
6 Equality: From Fact to Norm	101
7 Ways That Bad Things Can Be Good: A Lighter Look at the Problem of Evil	116
8 Justice, Incentives, and Selfishness	117
9 Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice	134
10 Political Philosophy and Personal Behavior	148

Envoi	180
Notes	183
Bibliography	221
Credits	227
Index	229

Prospectus

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

I read *The Great Gatsby* in 1963, and I found its final sentence, which is reproduced above, particularly arresting. Over the course of the past thirty-three years, I have often repeated that sentence to myself, with a mixture of good and sad feelings.

Scott Fitzgerald's sentence is, of course, about everybody: "we," here, means all of us. But while each person's past weighs strongly on his or her present, for some it weighs more heavily than for others, and it certainly weighs very heavily for me. For I was raised in a working-class communist family in a communist community in the 1940s in Montreal, on a very strongly egalitarian doctrine, and, with all the history both public and private that I have since witnessed and undergone, I have remained attached to the normative teachings of my childhood, and, in particular, to a belief in equality, which I continue to hold and to propound. I cannot escape from it. A powerful current bears me back to it ceaselessly, no matter where I might otherwise try to row.

I am deeply grateful for the opportunity these lectures afford me to reflect on my belief in equality, and on the several ways that other thinkers have conceived both the character of equality and the mode of its advent. Three currents of thought for which social equality, in some form, is in some sense morally imperative have influenced the content of these lectures: first, classical Marxism; second, egalitarian liberalism, as it presents itself in the work of John Rawls; and, finally, the egalitarian strain within Christianity. These three doctrines regard equality, in one or

other form, as the answer to the question of distributive justice—the question, that is, about what distribution of benefits and burdens in society is just. But the three understand equality as something to be delivered by very different agencies.

According to classical Marxists, as I shall explain in Lectures 3–6, we come to equality through and as a result of history. Marxists live in the faith that the consummation of centuries of exploitation and class struggle will be a condition of material abundance that confers on each human being full scope for self-realization, in a society in which the free development of each will be the condition of the free development of all. For Rawlsians, delivering equality is a task not of class struggle (crowned by a future abundance) but of constitution-making. Democratic politics must institute principles of an egalitarian kind, or, to be more precise, principles that mandate equality save where inequality benefits those who are worst off in society. For Christians, both the Marxist and the Rawlsian conceptions are misguided, since equality requires not mere history and the abundance to which it leads, or mere politics, but a moral revolution, a revolution in the human soul.¹

When I was a child, and then an adolescent, I knew about and I believed Marxism, and I knew about and I *disbelieved* Christianity. A radical liberalism no doubt existed in some pre-Rawlsian form, but I didn't know about it. My attitude to the Christian attitude to equality—to the attitude, that is, of those Christians who believed in equality—was surprise mixed with mild contempt: I thought that the Christian prescription for equality was utterly naive, and that the transformation of society not by class struggle but by the moral struggle that Christianity demanded was not only impractical but also unnecessary. It was impractical because you could not change society by a sequence of individual self-transformations, and it was unnecessary because history was destined to make equality unavoidable. With all the moral striving in the world, equality would be *impossible to achieve* under the material scarcity that divides society into classes, and equality would be *impossible to avoid* under the material abundance which obliterates class difference and thereby makes a moral struggle for equality pointless. So in neither case—neither under past and present scarcity, nor under future abundance—would moral struggle be called for. And as for egalitarian liberalism, had I encountered it, then I would have said that its faith in constitution-building as a means to equality was also misconceived. I would

have said that egalitarian constitution-building presupposes a social unity for which equality is itself a prerequisite. I would have said that we cannot make a constitution *together* unless and until we are already equals, unless we are already the equals that only history can make us become.

As I shall indicate in Lecture 6, I have lost my Marxist belief in the inevitability of equality. As I shall indicate in Lecture 9, I also reject the liberal faith in the sufficiency of political recipes. I now believe that a change in social ethos, a change in the attitudes people sustain toward each other in the thick of daily life, is necessary for producing equality, and that belief brings me closer than I ever expected to be to the Christian view of these matters that I once disparaged. So in one big respect I have outrowed Scott Fitzgerald's stream; in one big respect I have outgrown my past.

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 now am. For the three forms of egalitarian doctrine 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. That is so because an emphasis on ethos is at the center of my present view, and the Marxist view has less time for ethos, as an engine of social transformation, than the liberal one does. I have, then, proceeded, within one understanding of the following contrast, from the hardest position to the softest one (without, as it happens, having at any point embraced the middle, liberal, position). Very roughly speaking, I have moved from an economic point of view to a moral one, without ever occupying a political one. (Needless to say, I regard this progression as an improvement, induced by increased appreciation of truth, rather than a piece of backsliding for which I should apologize.)

Three views may be taken about what might be called the *site* of distributive justice—about, that is, the sorts of items to which principles of distributive justice apply. One is my own view, for which there is ample Judeo-Christian precedent, that *both* just rules *and* just personal choice within the framework set by just rules are necessary for distributive justice. A second view, held by some Christians, is that all justice is a matter of morally informed personal decision; on this particular Christian view, the rules set by Caesar can achieve little or nothing in the direction of establishing a just society. And a third possibility, which is hard to envisage

in a Christian form, is the Rawlsian view that distributive justice and injustice are features of the rules of the public order alone. What others might see as justice in personal choice (within such rules), Rawls would see as some different virtue, such as charity, or generosity, or self-denial; or, if indeed justice, then not justice in the sense in which it is the central concern of political philosophy.² I shall argue in Lectures 8–10 that this Rawlsian and, more generally, liberal view represents an evasion—an evasion of the burden of respecting distributive justice in the choices of everyday life, an evasion which may (or may not: it is very hard to tell) be encouraged by the circumstance that contemporary egalitarian political philosophers are, on average, much wealthier than other people are.

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 of Judeo-Christian thought.

I *believe* that my topic is a suitable one for the Gifford Lectures. There is some basis for anxiety about that, since, in the testament in which he established these lectures, Lord Gifford directed that they be devoted to “Promoting, Advancing, Teaching, and Diffusing . . . the knowledge of God, the Infinite, the All, the First and Only Cause, the One and Sole Substance, the Sole Being, the Sole Reality, and the Sole Existence,”³ and so forth, and I cannot say that this will be my topic, in a very strict sense. But in the 110 years that have passed since Lord Gifford endowed this chair, its “patrons”⁴ have wisely failed to insist on a strict construal of the condition that I have just quoted.

The “patrons” have interpreted Lord Gifford’s directive very broadly, in two respects. First, one is not required to discuss God in the severely metaphysical terms, just illustrated, in which He is portrayed in Lord Gifford’s will. A focus on religion itself, rather than on the supreme object of religious devotion in its most abstract specification, will do. Thus, for example, an existential treatment of religion, an examination of religious belief as it is lived by the believer, or a study of the social or historical emplacement of religion: these, too, are allowed to pass muster. And the second respect in which Lord Gifford’s directive has been subjected to a relaxed interpretation is that the lecturer is not required to devote all of his or her attention to religious themes, however broadly the idea of a

religious theme may be construed. Only a portion of the lectures need be concentrated in that direction.

Now, I happen to hold old-fashioned views about the terms of bequests. To accept a bequest is to make a promise, and promises should, normally, be kept. Accordingly, I felt able to accept the invitation to deliver these lectures only after correspondence and reflection which satisfied me that I could offer something at least as close to the spirit of the bequest as what the invitation had specified. You may come to think that I shall not go very far toward satisfying Lord Gifford's wishes, but you should not reach that conclusion without taking into account a perhaps surprising liberality in the terms of his bequest which is expressed at a different point in his will from the one at which there appears the phrase that I quoted a moment ago. I have in mind Lord Gifford's willingness to allow that the lecturers

may be of any denomination whatever or of no denomination at all (and many earnest and high-minded men prefer to belong to no ecclesiastical denomination); they may be of any religion or way of thinking, or, as is sometimes said, they may be of no religion, or they may be so-called sceptics or agnostics or free-thinkers, provided only that the "patrons" will use diligence to secure that they be able reverent men, true thinkers, sincere lovers of and earnest inquirers after truth.⁵

So we have, on the one hand, a requirement that the lectures be devoted to promoting the knowledge of God, and, on the other hand, a considerable liberality, or openness, with respect to who may deliver these lectures. Now, either those two parts of Lord Gifford's will are consistent with each other, or they are not. If the two parts are indeed inconsistent, if the liberality as to *who* is inconsistent with the stringency as to *what*, then Lord Gifford contradicted himself, and it's hard for me to know what I'm supposed to try to do. But if, as we may more charitably suppose, his will was consistent, then Lord Gifford envisaged promotion of the knowledge of God being effected in a great variety of ways. If an agnostic—for that, not an atheist, is what *I* am—if an agnostic can advance the knowledge of God, then perhaps I shall do so here.

In addressing my chosen theme, I hope to bring together two interests of mine that I have not otherwise had the opportunity to connect. The first interest is pursued in my recent research work in political philosophy, which is devoted to a critique, from the left, of John Rawls's theory