

**G.A. COHEN**

**ON THE CURRENCY OF EGALITARIAN JUSTICE,  
AND OTHER ESSAYS IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY**

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# AMERICA'S DOWNTOWNS

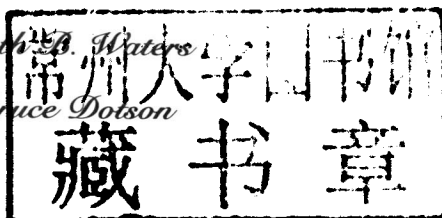
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G R O W T H  
P O L I T I C S &  
P R E S E R V A T I O N

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FOR THE NATIONAL TRUST  
FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

*Edited by*  
*Constance Epton Beaumont*

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G. A. COHEN

*Edited by Michael Otsuka*



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## EDITOR'S PREFACE

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AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH IN AUGUST 2009, G. A. Cohen had plans to bring together a number of his previously uncollected papers but had not yet chosen which ones to collect. This volume is an attempt to fulfill those plans. Cohen's selections were to have been informed by a list of "prime articles" that he had compiled in 2005 while preparing a collection to be published in Chinese translation.<sup>1</sup> Although most of the listed articles have already appeared in one or another of Cohen's six books published in English, nine of them have not. This volume publishes five of these nine articles, either in whole or in part, and the other four will be published, along with other writings, in one or another of two forthcoming volumes of Cohen's work.<sup>2</sup>

The five that are published here are "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice," "Capitalism, Freedom, and the Proletariat," "Illusions about Private Property and Freedom," "Freedom and Money," and "Back to Socialist Basics." This volume brings together those and other publications, plus some unpublished material, that fall squarely within the category of contemporary political philosophy. Three of Cohen's six books mentioned above have already brought together previously published papers in contemporary political philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Although the papers reprinted in this volume were originally published as long ago as 1981, none of them had been excluded from any of those three collections on grounds of quality. Rather, as I shall explain below, they were uncollected because they fell outside the organizing concepts of any of the previous collections. Cohen left us with thematically distinct and coherent bodies of outstanding work in contemporary political philosophy for collection here. The major theme of this book is "luck egalitarianism," which is the name Cohen borrowed to describe his view that "accidental inequality is

<sup>1</sup> This collection was published as *Between Marx and Nozick* in 2007.

<sup>2</sup> One of these books will collect Cohen's writings on the history of moral and political philosophy, and another will collect various philosophical reflections along with some memoirs.

<sup>3</sup> These three books are *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (1995), *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (2000), and *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (2008). The reprinted papers were often extensively revised for these volumes, which also included previously unpublished papers. (Cohen's other three books are *Karl Marx's Theory of History* [1978, rev. ed. 2000], *History, Labour, and Freedom* [1988], and *Why Not Socialism?* [2009].)

unjust.”<sup>4</sup> Two minor themes are the relation between property and freedom and between ideal theory and political practice. These three themes form the three parts of this book.

“On the Currency,” which has been reprinted as the first chapter of this book, is Cohen’s best-known and most widely cited article. This was the paper in which Cohen first advanced and defended his luck egalitarian thesis that “the right reading of egalitarianism” is “that its purpose is to eliminate *involuntary disadvantage*.” By ‘disadvantage’ he meant an individual’s shortfall in resources, capacities, or welfare. Such a shortfall was involuntary, on Cohen’s account, when it did not appropriately reflect the choices of the sufferer.

“On the Currency” traces its origin to a paper that Cohen prepared for a World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER) symposium, “The Quality of Life,” in Helsinki in July 1988. The symposium paper was too long for publication as an article or book chapter, and Cohen therefore divided it into two partially overlapping parts. The larger part was published as “On the Currency” in 1989, and the rest of it was published as “Equality of What?” in the following year. The views of Ronald Dworkin and T. M. Scanlon provided the distinctive critical focus of “Currency,” whereas “Equality of What?” was oriented around the views of Amartya Sen. In bringing these two papers back together as Chapters 1 and 2 of this volume, I have eliminated most of the overlap between them through an abridgment of “Equality of What?”

I have also included a previously unpublished Afterword to these two chapters that Cohen wrote in the early nineties when he intended to reprint this pair of articles as the concluding chapters of his 1995 collection *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality*. Cohen ultimately decided against publication there on grounds that these two papers detracted from that book’s focus on Nozick, self-ownership, and world-ownership and would be better placed in a later collection around the theme of egalitarian justice. The ideal of equality figured prominently in Cohen’s next two books—*If You’re an Egalitarian* and *Rescuing Justice and Equality*. But since these works were an unanticipated flowering of a critique of Rawls that was rooted in Cohen’s Tanner Lectures from the early nineties,<sup>5</sup> it turned out once again that inclusion of “Currency” and “Equality of What?” would have been out of place.

During his extended period of reflection on Rawls, Cohen continued to be engaged by the debate over luck egalitarianism that “On the Cur-

<sup>4</sup> See *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, p. 8. Elizabeth Anderson coined the term ‘luck egalitarianism’ in her “What Is the Point of Equality?”

<sup>5</sup> See “Incentives, Inequality, and Community.”



rency” and “Equality of What?” had played a major role in shaping. He published work consisting of defenses, clarifications, and refinements of his earlier arguments and conclusions. Part I (Chapters 1–6) of this book collects most of these subsequent articles along with the original pair.

Chapter 3 (“Sen on Capability, Freedom, and Control”) consists of excerpts from a review of Amartya Sen’s *Inequality Reexamined*. I have chosen to reprint those passages which provide an illuminatingly clear and simple statement of Sen’s notion of ‘capability’ and which expand upon Cohen’s critique of Sen on freedom in “Equality of What?”

Chapters 4 and 5 arose as responses to criticisms of “Currency” by Ronald Dworkin and Susan Hurley, respectively.

Cohen’s was a more comprehensively luck egalitarian position than Dworkin’s insofar as it was opposed to unchosen disadvantage in the denomination of welfare. Chapter 4 (“Expensive Taste Rides Again”) offers a robust and extended defense of the welfarist component of Cohen’s egalitarian principle of distribution against Dworkin’s objections to the subsidy of expensive tastes that the equalization of people’s opportunities for welfare requires.<sup>6</sup>

Chapter 5 (“Luck and Equality”) defends Cohen’s claim, in “Currency,” that “a large part of the fundamental egalitarian aim is to extinguish the effect of brute luck on distribution,” where brute luck consists of differences in fortune that are not a reflection of choice.

‘Brute luck’ is to be contrasted with ‘option luck,’ where the latter consists of differences in fortune that are the upshot of chosen gambles.<sup>7</sup> Whereas Cohen had previously endorsed Dworkin’s view that egalitarian justice does not call for the compensation of those whose misfortune is purely down to bad option luck,<sup>8</sup> in Chapter 6 (“Fairness and Legitimacy in Justice”) he voices sympathy for the conflicting position that option luck never preserves the justice of the prior distribution. Cohen’s skepticism regarding the justice of option luck, as voiced in this, his last

<sup>6</sup>I should explain why I have not collected an earlier and related piece by Cohen entitled “Expensive Tastes and Multiculturalism.” His claim in that paper that state support for minority cultures is analogous to the subsidy of an “expensive taste” has left a mark on the literature on multiculturalism. Moreover, this paper was published in a book that is hard to obtain. Nevertheless, I believe that Cohen would not have wanted to reprint it in a collection of his work, as he came to believe that his discussion of multiculturalism rested upon a misrepresentation of the work of Will Kymlicka. In an email of June 2009, he wrote: “I should warn that I don’t think the article is very good. Its best bits were extracted and developed in my later article ‘Expensive Taste Rides Again’ [i.e., Chapter 4 of this volume—Ed.]. They are the bits that aren’t about multiculturalism in particular.”

<sup>7</sup>The terminology is Dworkin’s. See his “Equality of Resources,” p. 293, and p. 131 of this volume below.

<sup>8</sup>See, for examples, the first paragraph, including n. 3, of Section 2 of Chapter 1 and Cohen’s remarks on “Shirley” in Section 10 of Chapter 4 of this volume.

published word on the subject, was another respect in which his version of luck egalitarianism was more thoroughly opposed than Dworkin's to differences in advantage that are a matter of good or bad fortune.

The relation between freedom and property is the theme of Part II (Chapters 7 and 8) of this book.

In the concluding sentence of "Robert Nozick and Wilt Chamberlain" (1977), which was Cohen's debut publication in normative political philosophy, he wrote that "it should now be clear that 'libertarian' capitalism sacrifices liberty to capitalism, a truth its advocates are able to deny only because they are prepared to abuse the language of freedom."<sup>9</sup> Cohen's subsequent writings on freedom can be seen as developments and further vindication of that early charge.

This case against libertarianism achieved refined form in the revised version of "Capitalism, Freedom, and the Proletariat" (1991), which is reprinted as Chapter 7. The "principal contention" of this paper "is that, while liberals and libertarians see the freedom which is intrinsic to capitalism, they overlook the unfreedom which necessarily accompanies capitalist freedom." Moreover, the socialist communalization of capitalist private property would often be "in the interest of liberty itself."

Cohen had published an earlier version of this paper in 1979, and his revised version drew heavily on two papers published during the intervening period: "Illusions about Private Property and Freedom" (1981) and "The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom" (1983, and, in revised form, 1988). Although "Illusions" appeared along with "Capitalism, Freedom, and the Proletariat" on Cohen's list of "prime articles," this volume does not reprint the former in full, since most of that article, and everything that was central to its main lines of argument, was incorporated in revised and more tightly focused form into the revised version of "Capitalism, Freedom, and the Proletariat" included here. The volume does, however, include an Appendix to Chapter 7 that consists of a section of "Illusions" to which Cohen referred in a footnote to "Capitalism, Freedom, and the Proletariat." I have also added a footnote of my own that reproduces a passage from "Illusions" which extends some remarks on communal versus private property in "Capitalism, Freedom, and the Proletariat."

The above articles showed the ways in which the property holdings of *others* constrain a person's freedom. Cohen noted, for example, that another's title deed to his back garden restricts my freedom to pitch my tent on that stretch of land. When he returned to this topic in "Freedom and Money" (2001), which is reprinted as Chapter 8, Cohen showed how a

<sup>9</sup>P. 21.

person's *own* holdings—his money, to be more precise—confer freedom upon him, and how his “lack of money, poverty, carries with it lack of freedom.” I have also included two previously unpublished Addenda to “Freedom and Money”: one on the relation between freedom and ability, which rejects Cohen's earlier stance on this topic, and another on goods, services, and interference.

Part III (Chapters 9–12) consists, among other things, of reflections on the relation between ideal theory and political practice.

In Chapter 9 (“Mind the Gap”), which is an abridged version of a review of Nagel's *Equality and Partiality*, Cohen argues that Nagel misapplies moral theory in defense of existing practice when he appeals to the “distinction between the impersonal and personal standpoints” in a manner that privileges the status quo and the inequalities it contains.

In Chapter 10 (“Back to Socialist Basics”), Cohen argues that “[f]undamental socialist values which point to a form of society a hundred miles from the horizon of present possibility are needed to defend every half-mile of territory gained and to mount an attempt to regain each bit that has been lost.”

Chapter 11 (“How to Do Political Philosophy”) is a previously unpublished paper that Cohen presented at the first session of a standing Oxford M.Phil. Seminar on Contemporary Political Philosophy. In the original version of this paper, the material included in this volume was followed by a critique of Rawlsian constructivism that drew on a distinction between fundamental normative principles of justice and optimal rules of social regulation that Cohen was honing as he completed his book *Rescuing Justice and Equality*. This critique later took the expanded form of a paper—published here as Chapter 12 (“Rescuing Justice”)—that Cohen delivered as an academic talk while that book was in press.

I'm grateful to my editor, Ian Malcolm, for taking a special interest in this project and moving things along so swiftly and smoothly, to Lauren Lepow, for acutely observant copyediting, and to Kimberley Johnson, for her editorial assistance. Hillel Steiner and Andrew Williams served as readers for Princeton University Press, and I've benefited from their excellent judgment at several points. I'm grateful to Patrick Tomlin and Juri Viehoff for their assistance in preparing the index and checking the page proofs, and to All Souls College for funding their efforts. Special thanks to Jerry Cohen's wife, Michèle, and his three children, Gideon, Miriam, and Sarah, for all their support.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The following works, which constitute all or part of the chapters numbered below, have been reprinted, with gratefully acknowledged permission where appropriate:

1. "On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice." *Ethics* 99 (1989): 906–44.
2. "Equality of What? On Welfare, Goods, and Capabilities." In Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, eds. *The Quality of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993. Reprinted in part.
3. "Amartya Sen's Unequal World." *New Left Review*, No. 203, January–February 1994, pp. 117–29. Reprinted in part. The complete version can be found online at [www.newleftreview.org](http://www.newleftreview.org).
4. "Expensive Taste Rides Again." In Justine Burley, ed. *Dworkin and His Critics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004.
5. "Luck and Equality: A Reply to Hurley." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 72 (2006): 439–46.
6. "Fairness and Legitimacy in Justice, And: Does Option Luck Ever Preserve Justice?" In S. de Wijze, M. H. Kramer, and I. Carter, eds. *Hillel Steiner and the Anatomy of Justice*. New York: Routledge, 2009.
7. (i) "Capitalism, Freedom, and the Proletariat." In David Miller, ed. *The Liberty Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006.  
(ii) "Illusions about Private Property and Freedom." In Steven Cahn, ed. *Philosophy for the 21st Century: A Comprehensive Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Reprinted in part.
8. "Freedom and Money." *Revista Argentina de Teoria Juridica* 2 (2001): 1–32.
9. "Mind the Gap." *London Review of Books*, Vol. 14, No. 9, May 14, 1992, pp. 15–17. Reprinted in part. The complete version can be found online at [www.lrb.co.uk](http://www.lrb.co.uk).
10. "Back to Socialist Basics." *New Left Review*, No. 207, September–October 1994, pp. 3–16. Reprinted in part. The complete version can be found online at [www.newleftreview.org](http://www.newleftreview.org).
12. *Rescuing Justice and Equality*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008. Reprinted in part.

The Afterword to Chapters 1 and 2, Addenda to Chapter 8, all of Chapter 11, and part of Chapter 12 are previously unpublished.

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PART ONE

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Luck Egalitarianism



