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## Equality, Community, and Diversity in Cohen's Socialist Ideal

*Abstract:* The 'community principle' is crucial to G. A. Cohen's argument for socialism, because it is the best independent argument he has adduced for his strongly egalitarian conclusions. Cohen argues that even small differences in wealth ought to be prohibited because they bring us out of community with one another. In this paper, I show that his underlying premises lead to some repugnant conclusions, and thus should be rejected. If Cohen is right that even small differences in wealth can upset community, then, by the very psychological mechanisms he identifies, we should think that other differences, such as differences in religion, conceptions of the good, race, or taste, should also upset community. Cohen is thus caught in a trap: the more strongly egalitarian his community principle is, the more it not only prohibits differences of wealth, but diversity of any kind, including the forms of diversity we should celebrate rather than reject.

### 1. Introduction

Gerald Cohen is to Marxism what Peter Singer is to utilitarianism. Singer advocates controversial moral positions, such as veganism and a highly demanding duty of charity. But Singer does not solely try to defend these on utilitarian grounds. Instead, he argues from widely accepted, commonsense moral intuitions and ideas. He tries to show his readers that they already accept certain moral ideas and principles that in turn imply these controversial conclusions.

Cohen tries to do the same for Marxism and socialism. To argue for Marxist conclusions, Cohen does not first try to convince readers to accept heterodox Marxist economics.<sup>1</sup> Nor does he rely upon a Marxist theory of history, though he himself advocates a reconstructed version (Cohen 1978). Instead, Cohen relies upon widely shared moral intuitions, intuitions shared even by conservatives, free marketers, and libertarians. In particular, in his widely celebrated posthumous book *Why Not Socialism?*, Cohen employs a simple thought experiment to show readers that deep down they already believe that a socialist society is morally ideal. He describes an idealized socialist form of life, and points out that this form of life, by the readers' own moral intuitions, is clearly superior to real-life capitalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Cohen 1983, 24, accepts that "bourgeois economics" is basically sound.

In previous work criticizing Cohen, I accepted for the sake of argument that Cohen’s vision of an idealized socialist society was internally coherent and desirable; I just argued that, to everyone’s surprise, a version of capitalism is more desirable, even on left-wing grounds (Brennan 2014). I accepted that that Cohen’s ideal form of socialism is good; I just argued that an ideal form of capitalism would be even better.

In contrast, this essay engages in an internal critique of Cohen’s vision of a socialist society. I argue that one of Cohen’s favored moral principles is undesirable—it has implications that upon reflection few of us would be willing to endorse.

Cohen claims that an ideal socialist society instantiates a few egalitarian and socialist principles. The first, called “socialist equality of opportunity”, is a luck-egalitarian principle that “seeks to correct for *all* unchosen disadvantages, disadvantages, that is, for which the agent cannot herself be held responsible” (Cohen 2009, 17). The motivating idea behind luck egalitarianism is that no one should be better or worse off than others due merely to luck. Cohen regards socialist equality of opportunity as a principle of justice; a society must instantiate it on pain of injustice.

Another principle, “the principle of communal reciprocity” is “the anti-market principle in which I serve you not because of what I can get in return by doing so, but because you need or want my service, and you, for the same reason, serve me” (Cohen 2009, 39). Cohen seems to regard this not as a principle of justice, but as a moral ideal.

I take no issue with either principle in this paper. I think the luck egalitarian tradition is based on a mistake, but I do not criticize it here. I myself advocate the principle of communal reciprocity, but, as I argued in *Why Not Capitalism?*, under ideal circumstances, capitalism satisfies it just as much as socialism, and in realistic practice, it actually satisfies it better (Brennan 2014, 24–6). Contrary to Cohen, communal reciprocity is not an ‘anti-market principle’.

In this essay, I focus entirely on the remaining principle, the ‘principle of community’. Cohen claims that what makes a socialist system desirable is, in part, that it uniquely allows people to be in community with one another. But, he claims, inequalities that are too large will impede or destroy such community. It is unclear just how egalitarian the principle is supposed to be, though it is clear the principle is supposed to forbid many of the inequalities that the socialist principle of opportunity would allow.<sup>2</sup> Cohen remains somewhat agnostic about whether the community principle is specifically a principle of justice, or merely a moral ideal that a socialist society must realize (Cohen 2009, 37).

Though Cohen spends little space in his massive corpus defending this principle of community, this principle is crucial for his philosophy. He needs this principle, or some replacement for it, to be sound in order to get the conclusions he wants. The problem Cohen identifies is that luck egalitarianism is not egalitarian enough. Even Cohen’s more radically egalitarian version of luck

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<sup>2</sup> Cohen 2008, 2, says that “in a society in which distributive justice prevails, people’s material prospects are roughly equal”; justice does not allow the “deep inequality” allowed by “John Rawls and his followers”.

egalitarianism allows for radical inequalities, provided these inequalities are generated the right way. Thus, the purpose of Cohen's 'principle of community' is to generate even more egalitarian outcomes than luck egalitarianism requires. It is meant to forbid most of the inequalities that would be permitted by socialist equality of opportunity (Cohen 2009, 37).

Another reason this principle is so important for Cohen is that he needs to have an independent argument for egalitarianism that does not beg the question. So, for instance, much of Cohen's part work, from his critiques of Robert Nozick and John Rawls, are meant to refute attempts to justify inequality, e.g., by undermine arguments that some people deserve more than others or that giving some people more is necessary to motivate them to work hard for the common good.<sup>3</sup> Suppose he is right and that all of these justifications of inequality fail. Even if so, that does imply that material egalitarianism is correct. We cannot just assume, without argument, that equality is a baseline from which departures must be justified. But without a sound argument for this assumption, Cohen's strategy of refuting justifications for inequality makes no difference, even if it succeeds. A non-egalitarian can just say, 'Sure, these arguments for inequality fail, but as far as I'm concerned, they do not need to succeed, because we have no reason to presume equality is a baseline from which departures must be justified'. In Cohen's entire corpus, the principle of community, though underdeveloped, seems to be his best independent argument for presuming that equality is just such a baseline.

In this paper, I argue for two points. The first, relatively banal point, is that the thought experiment on which Cohen bases his case for socialism provides little support for this principle of community.

The second, more pressing complaint, is that the grounds Cohen offers in defense of the community principle have some unattractive implications. Cohen claims that differences in wealth will cause us to be unable to empathize with each other properly or to properly share in a common life. For that reason, Cohen thinks, we should reject most inequalities that luck egalitarianism alone would allow. Cohen leaves it somewhat unclear just how egalitarian the principle of community is, just how much inequality it allows.

However, the problem for Cohen is that the more egalitarian the community principle is, the more the principle forbids not only differences in wealth, but *other* kinds of differences, differences which even Cohen should regard as morally unproblematic or even desirable. Even in ideal circumstances, people can have *blameless, morally unproblematic* differences in taste, personality, religious views, and views of the good life; moreover, people in a just society could belong to different races or ethnic groups. In the reasons Cohen offers us for endorsing his egalitarian community principle are correct, then, I will argue, these other kinds of differences should be seen just as much (or even more) of a threat to community as differences in wealth. So, I'll argue, Cohen has two uncomfortable choices: (1.) He could continue to endorse the community principle, but interpret it as so weakly egalitarian that it does little work for him. (2.) He could continue to endorse the principle for his stated reasons, but interpret it in a

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<sup>3</sup> For a summary of Cohen's criticisms, see Cohen 1994, 11-15.

highly egalitarian way, in which case the principle will have unattractive and implausible implications.

## 2. Cohen's Camping Trip

Cohen has a simple, intuitive argument for the moral superiority of socialism. He asks readers to imagine a camping trip among friends. The friends, motivated by kindness and sense of the common good, distribute the benefits and burdens of camping in an equitable way. They decide to treat the goods they have brought with them as a commonly held bounty, and, while on the trip, live a socialist lifestyle. The trip sounds wonderful.

In the socialist camping trip, Cohen stipulates that campers have the “common aim [...] that each [...] should have a good time doing, so far as possible, the things that he or she likes best” (Cohen 2009, 3). Cohen specifies that campers do some activities separately and some together. The friends in the camping trip retain significant freedom to live as they see fit. The community is not so totalizing that it swallows up its members. His thought experiment reveals that Cohen believes an ideal socialist community is not threatened by its members retaining significant individuality or having significant differences among themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Thus—and this will turn out to be important—Cohen's camping trip as he initially describes it appeals to commonsense individualism, not just to radical collectivists. Most people, commonsensically, place a high value on solidaristic community, but they also believe it is important 1) to recognize and respect that people are individuals who need their private spaces, and 2) that people are different, and there are a plurality of good modes of life. Cohen's *Why Not Socialism?* is powerful precisely because Cohen avoids begging the question in favor of socialism or collectivism. He instead defends socialism on the basis of widely shared intuitions about individual freedom, beneficence, and community.

Cohen later asks readers to imagine the campers start acting ‘like capitalists’—they refuse to help each other unless they get paid, and the better off gloat because they have more than the worse off. The so-called capitalist camping trip looks awful.

Cohen asks readers, wasn't the socialist version of the camping trip clearly better than the capitalist version? If we could make the whole world like the socialist camping trip, wouldn't that clearly be better, from a moral point of view, than real-life capitalism? Most readers—including me—answer yes to these two questions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For a further argument from Cohen that socialism and freedom of the right sort are compatible, see Cohen 2008, 181–228.

<sup>5</sup> As I argue in Brennan 2013 and 2014, even if the answer to both questions is *yes*, this doesn't yet show that socialism is superior to capitalism. It just shows that ideal socialism—in which Cohen can stipulate that people have morally flawless motives—is better than realistic capitalism, but leaves open whether ideal capitalism is better or worse than ideal socialism, or whether realistic capitalism is better or worse than realistic socialism.

Some will object to Cohen that the lifestyle of the camping trip is not feasible on a large scale (e.g. see Otteson 2014). But, Cohen responds, whether something is feasible has little to do with whether it is morally desirable. Many things are morally desirable even though they are or might be infeasible. It is morally desirable for me to cure AIDS by clicking my heels together three times, though clearly that is infeasible. It is morally desirable for all wars to end and for us to live together in cooperative, pacifist anarchism, though that also seems infeasible.

In the course of describing the socialist camping trip, Cohen outlines what he regards as the moral principles of the socialist camping trip realizes: socialist equality of opportunity, communal reciprocity, and the principle of community. Cohen does not defend these principles at great length, nor does he attempt to show they are preferable to other competing principles.<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, Cohen admits that there are a number of “competing egalitarian principles with which the camping trip [...] complies, because the simple circumstances of the trip, unlike more complex ones, do not force a choice among them” (Cohen 2009, 13).

This is no small point. Even if readers find the socialist camping trip attractive, that does not imply the readers are at all committed to Cohen's favored principles of justice or community. The camping trip argument is an argument for the desirability of socialism, but not itself an argument for Cohen's favored moral principles. The camping trip may be an attractive ideal, but it is compatible with a wide range of competing views of what justice requires. Because the camping trip is small-scale and, by Cohen's own admission, does not force campers to make any complex moral choices, it happens to comply with or realize Cohen's favored principles. But there is little in the description of the camping trip to show that the campers desire to or are trying to realize Cohen's principles. In short, the camping trip thought experiment severely underdetermines the content of a theory of justice. A person could easily find the camping trip attractive or ideal and yet not be motivated to accept Cohen's principles. Thus, Cohen needs to do additional philosophical work to convince us of his favored principles of justice. It seems Cohen agrees.

Cohen has done some such work in favor of the principle of socialist equality of opportunity (Cohen 1989). That is, for those who already endorse some version of luck egalitarianism, he has elsewhere provided an argument that his version of luck egalitarianism is superior to others. (Even those of us who find luck egalitarianism entirely unmotivated can still agree that his version is more coherent than others.) But, that said, a reader could agree that the socialist camping trip presents an ideal form of life while remaining agnostic or hostile toward socialist equality of opportunity.

The principle of community is deeply problematic. I argue here that it is far less attractive than Cohen thinks. Indeed, the more egalitarian the principle is, the more reason we have to reject it.

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<sup>6</sup> However, he does defend his version of luck egalitarianism in Cohen 1989.

### 3. The Principle of Community

Cohen claims that the (luck egalitarian) principle of socialist equality of opportunity is “consistent with three forms of *inequality*”, two of which are relatively unproblematic, but the third of which is “very problematic” (Cohen 2009, 24–5). As Cohen explains:

“The truly problematic inequality in overall benefit, the substantial inequality that is consistent with socialist equality of opportunity, is inequality that reflects differences in what philosophers call *option luck*. The paradigm case of option luck is a deliberate gamble. We start out equally placed, with \$100 each [...]. We [decide to] flip a coin on the understanding that I give you \$50 if it comes up heads, and you give me \$50 if it comes up tails. I end up with \$150 and you end up with \$50, and with no extra anything to offset that monetary shortfall.” (Cohen 2009, 30–1)

Cohen makes it clear that the people making this bet start off as equal in all morally relevant ways, and that the bet is voluntary. He also makes it clear that while the loser regrets losing, the loser still considers it a reasonable bet, and would be willing to make such a bet again. No exploitation has occurred. Still, Cohen claims, the resulting inequality is ‘very’ morally problematic, and socialists should find the resulting inequality ‘repugnant’.

Cohen worries that socialist equality of opportunity remains compatible with widespread, radical inequality, provided the inequalities come about the right way, such as through option luck. Socialist equality of opportunity requires a kind of equality in starting points, but no equality in results. For Cohen, then, the community principle is supposed to take care of the inequalities that socialist equality of opportunity would admit; it is supposed to help generate equal results. Still, Cohen does not quite tell us just *how* egalitarian this community principle is. Does it allow *any* inequality, and if so, how much?

In some writings, Cohen seems to advocate something close to complete egalitarianism: “Egalitarians like me think justice is *fully* served only if people’s access to desirable conditions of life is equal, within the constraints of a reasonable personal prerogative.” (Cohen 2008, 181, emphasis mine) This passage suggests that justice would require perfect equality were it not constrained by personal prerogative. Cohen never quite tells us just how much a reasonable personal prerogative constrains the push for perfect equality, but as the example of option luck seems to indicate, he thinks two guys making a voluntary bet in which one ends up \$100 richer than the other—a bet that both players wanted to make and would make again—is beyond the pale. This suggests that the space of a ‘reasonable personal prerogative’ is tiny, and that this reasonable personal prerogative allows very little inequality.

However, elsewhere, Cohen seems to suggest that the community principle allows greater inequality. He says that we “cannot enjoy full community, you and I, if you make and keep, say, ten times as much money as I do [...].” (Cohen 2009, 35). Cohen might think you and I cannot enjoy full community if you make

twice as much money as I do (or if you win \$100 from me in a voluntary bet), but here he is at least appealing to more intuitive and widely shared notions of how inequality could undermine community.

Why should inequalities resulting from option luck threaten community? His main worry, as James Otteson summarizes it, is that a rich man and a poor man live in “virtually separate worlds” (Otteson 2014, 73). As Cohen elaborates, if you make ten times as much money as I do, then

“[...] my life will then labor under challenges that you will never face, challenges that your could help me to cope with, but do not, because you keep your money [...]. To illustrate, I am rich [...] and you are poor [...]. You have to ride the crowded bus every day, whereas I pass you by in my comfortable car. One day, however, I must take the bus, because my wife needs the car. I can reasonably complain about that to a fellow car-driver, but not to you. I can't say to you: 'It's awful that I have to take the bus today.' There is a lack of community between us [...]. And it will show itself in many others way, for we enjoy widely different powers to care for ourselves, to protect and care for offspring, to avoid danger, and so on.” (Cohen 2009, 35–6)

The main idea here seems to be that if one of us I much better off, we will lead such different lives that we will not have a sufficient degree of common experiences, including exposure to common challenges. Since we face different challenges and have such different experiences, we will not be able to properly empathize or sympathize with one another. We will be virtual aliens to one another, and so cannot properly be in community with one another.

The first sentence of the quoted passages suggests an even more strongly egalitarian reading. It suggests that if you have more money than I do, this violates community because you *could* help me, but chose not to do so. The problem is not just that we are different, but that you were not as benevolent as you could be. So, suppose you have \$10 more than I do. Suppose I encounter a challenge that can be solved by you giving me that \$10, but you choose to keep it for yourself. In that case, you could have helped me, but did not. Cohen might think that this failure to act benevolently undermines community, though he does not elaborate on this further.

Cohen later returns to the example of a lottery. Suppose you eat much better than the rest of us because of option luck. You won a lottery that we all freely entered. Here, “even though there is no injustice [...], your luck cuts you off from our common life, and the ideal of community condemns that, and therefore also condemns the running of any such lottery” (Cohen 2009, 38). Here, the problem is that you are sufficiently different from the rest of us; you fail to share sufficiently in our common experiences.

So, Cohen has at least one but perhaps two major reasons to hold that inequalities resulting from option luck would violate the ideal of community. The main worry is that such inequalities create differences that in turn create disconnections. The second worry—the worry I am not sure he really has—is

that inequalities show that people were not as benevolent as they could have been; they could, after all, have given some of their money or goods to their neighbors to help them face whatever challenges they face. Let's examine both worries in turn.

#### 4. Difference and Community

Cohen believes that differences in wealth translate into different life experiences, different exposure and vulnerability to challenges, and so on, that can reduce the degree to which we form a community. If I am very rich and you are very poor, I cannot fully understand and empathize with your plight. Moreover, it seems inappropriate for me to complain about many of my problems in front of you, since things I might regard as temporary misfortune—such as having to take a crowded bus to work—might be common experience for you. So, differences in wealth can bring us apart.

Otteson reads Cohen as making the same kind of argument. As he describes the problem:

“[A rich person and poor person might] have very different home lives, different schooling and education, different vacations and job training; they will likely not eat in the same restaurants, take their children to the same parks, shop in the same stores, read the same books, watch the same television shows, vacation in the same places. [...] if they happened to ride the same bus one day, they would hardly recognize each other as fellow citizens and would scarcely have anything to talk about. Cohen concludes that they can therefore share no real community [...] large inequalities in wealth [...] have significant costs in community.” (Otteson 2014, 73–4)

Note that these concerns about inequality and community are not unique to socialists, but are widely shared. The conservative sociologist Charles Murray also argues that inequality causes white Americans to separate into two distinct groups that live separate worlds, have entire separate tastes, and who do not associate with one another (Murray 2012). The difference between Murray and Cohen, ultimately, is that Murray thinks meritocratic higher education combined with assortative mating—higher income, high IQ educated people choosing only to marry and reproduce only with other high income, high IQ, educated people—is what drives the process. For Murray, income inequality is a by-product of a different kind of inequality that is in turn undermining community. But Murray's book is nevertheless an empirical argument that the rich and poor whites in America are indeed no longer in community with one another.

Cohen's complaint that differences in wealth *can* undermine community seems right, as far as it goes. But there are two big problems here. First, while differences in wealth can bring us apart, they need not do so. Instead, it is a contingent question whether such differences in fact do so, contingent on our past life experiences, ability to empathize, on our psychology, and so on. Whether,

how, and how much differences in wealth undermine community appears in large part to be an empirical, social scientific question, which Cohen is ill-equipped to answer. Second, the bigger problem is that the mechanism that Cohen uses explain why differences in wealth should reduce community also suggests that *other* differences should be even bigger threats to community.

Let us start with the first worry. Large differences in wealth *can* be a threat to community, but that does not mean they *must* be. As a graduate student, I had little difficulty being in community with my advisors, though they made at least ten times my income. As a professor, I have little difficulty being in community with my graduate students, though they make less than a tenth of my income, and even though most of them will never make as much money as I do. Despite these differences, we had and have much stronger community with one another than we do with many others who have identical wealth. After all, we share common life experiences, common interests, and common challenges. When I was a student, my advisors had gone through roughly the same trials I had, and now that I am a professor, my students are going through roughly the same trials I went through.

That is not to say we have perfect community. But, that said, I understand them, empathize with them, and have better community with them, despite these massive inequalities of wealth, than I do with, say, my equally high-income neighbors, or even, surprisingly, than I do with my twin brother or my parents. Non-intellectuals generally seem like aliens to me. Their concerns seem dull, their mannerisms strange.

Consider that I can and have formed good communities with non-intellectuals who share my hobbies. For instance, I have a wide range of friends, some of whom make a tenth of my income, and some of whom make ten times my income, but all of whom shared a passion for guitar and are 'geeks' about high gain amplifiers. We are united by common interests, if not common income.

Similarly, I have friends who attend churches in which differences in income can be dramatic—some members are poor families struggling to get by, other members are comfortable, and yet others are wealthy businesspeople who own mansions. Still, these church communities are as tight-knit as Cohen's socialist camping trip seems to be. At the same time, though, these churchgoers are out of community with others. I, an atheist, often find their gatherings and concerns strange and somewhat alien. Muslims, Jews, or Catholics would find themselves drawn apart by such differences.

From the armchair, it seems like these sorts of points can be multiplied endlessly. Cohen is right that differences in wealth can impede us from being in full community with one another. But we know anecdotally they need not do so. Whether they do, and how much they do, is a contingent fact, depending on what we're like, how we react to differences, and what other things we have in common. In that sense, then, Cohen is on shaky ground. Whether (and to what degree and under what conditions) differences in wealth undermine equality is a social scientific question, to be determined through anthropological and sociological research. Cohen relies upon and cites no research in favor of his strictly egalitarian views. He sticks to intuitive philosophical arguments and anecdotes,

but he needs the social scientist's toolkit. Rather than having a solid argument, he just has a hypothesis.

This brings us to the second, more damaging point. In Cohen's story, the problem with differences in wealth appears to be not specifically differences in *wealth*, but *differences*, period. Differences in wealth are bad because they (could) cause us to lead very different lives and thus not sympathize with or understand each other. But so can other kinds of differences. People have different personalities, different tastes, different goals, different worries, and differing conceptions of the sublime, the holy, the sacred, the noble, or the good. Almost all people care about community, but they have different conceptions of what a good community would look like, about what things must be shared to enjoy full membership, and about what things can be different without being a threat. Something that could interfere with one kind of community might not be a threat to a different kind.

Consider the egalitarian Hutterite communities spread throughout North America. The Hutterites have strict rules against birth control and against using the Internet or other media. They share all goods equally. They cap their colony population at around 100 members—if a colony gets too large, they must split into separate colonies. (The goal is to ensure everyone knows everyone personally.) They eat all meals together communally. Finally, everyone has the same religion—they worship together daily—and has the same cultural tastes. (There are no outside influences (Schmidtz 1994).)

No doubt the Hutterites are in a tight community with one another; they realize Cohen's community principle as well as any realistic community I have read about. Indeed, they might realize it perfectly. But, note here that in realizing community with one another, the Hutterites make themselves aliens to others, including to Cohen and me. I have far more in common and am far more in community with billionaire Mark Cuban or with my housekeeper than I am or would be with any Hutterites.

Cohen, I presume, does not believe that all communities should look like secular versions of the Hutterite community, in which individuality and difference are suppressed. As I mentioned above, he wants his ideal communities to allow for difference and individuality. He wants community, but not totalistic community.

But this is a problem for Cohen. Since all sorts of differences can undermine or reduce the community that obtains among us, the stronger the community principle is meant to be, the less room it leaves for us to have such differences. If the community principle is strictly egalitarian—if it forbids you from even having a measly \$100 more than I—then this principle should also forbid you from being different in almost any way that would make you and I even slightly alien to one another. (Cohen might insist that that you having \$100 more than I is much more alienating than you have a different religion, but that's not plausible.) But if the community principle allows for massive differences in taste, religion, views of the good, ideas of the sublime, personality, and so on—all things that demonstrably reduce community and can render people alien to another—then it should also allow massive inequalities in wealth as well. After all, differences

in wealth are not in any obvious way *more* threatening to community than these other differences.

Cohen could try to respond that as a matter of fact, these differences in wealth are especially threatening to community in way that these other kinds of differences are not. He might be right. But this looks like an empirical claim, not a conceptual claim. Whether differences in wealth are more or less dangerous than these others differences is a social scientific question, something for political scientists to investigate, not for philosophers to assert. (Philosophers qua philosophers can at best help political scientists fix on a proper operational definition of 'community'.) Cohen doesn't want to just assert that that community is, by definition, a thing especially threatened by differences in wealth. This would come across as question-begging or ideological. Instead, what makes Cohen's arguments as persuasive as they are is that he relies upon relatively ordinary notions of community and a commonsensical *empirical* account of how differences in wealth can draw us apart.

So, Cohen has a serious problem. Insofar as we just take for granted his causal theory of how wealth undermines community, we have every reason to presume that other kinds of differences also undermine community just as much. However, if he wants to differentiate among these differences, arguing that differences in wealth hurt community in ways other kinds of differences do not, then he does not have supplied the social scientific research to back up his assertions, and it does not appear the research is out there to be found.

So, for instance, Cohen might have tried to determine whether mutual trust and a low Gini coefficient are positively correlated. I suspect they are, but I'm not going to run the regressions on Cohen's behalf. On the other hand, contrary to what Cohen might expect, we already know that mutual trust and market-orientation are strongly positively correlated, and also that market-orientation and income *equality* are strongly *positively* correlated (Brennan 2014, 68–9; Ashby/Sobel 2008; Scully 2002). (These results are well known, if not known to Cohen.) Cohen won't find much of use here to help him argue for socialism.

Suppose Cohen is lucky: some enterprising sociologists discover that differences in wealth do in fact undermine community more than other kinds of differences. Even this might not rescue Cohen. After all, the principle of community still forbids inequalities that make us fall out of community with one another. If it turns out material inequality is a greater threat to community than other kinds of differences, it might still turn out that these other kinds of differences are still major threats to community. If so, then Cohen would have to conclude that these other kinds of differences must not be tolerated. But, if so, then the community principle seems implausible; rather than accept its egalitarian implications, we should reject the principle.

Cohen might instead bite the bullet. He might just agree that for individuals within a community to be to be in full community, these individuals will indeed need to be extremely similar in most dimensions. He might accept that full community permits little individuality or diversity. He might simply accept that diversity within the community can and does tend to undermine community,

and so such diversity will need to be minimized for the ideal of community to obtain.

But, Cohen might respond, perhaps biting this bullet need not be as bad as it first sounds. Perhaps, in a socialist world, we might have many different kinds of full communities side-by-side. Diversity will exist *among* but not *within* the communities. Individuals from one community could be very different from individuals from another community, though individuals within single communities will be all close to the same. These many diverse communities will not be in community with one another—they will be more like an association of communities than a community of communities—but the ideal of community will obtain, because every individual will be a member of a full community.

This response would not solve the problem for Cohen. After all, Cohen wants the principle of community to forbid inequalities that would otherwise be allowed by the principle of socialist equality of opportunity. As I have shown, the mechanism by which material inequality is supposed to undermine community implies that diversity in general will undermine community. If Cohen says we should solve this problem by having many different socialist communities that are internally non-diverse, then presumably this solution works for wealth and income inequality as well. If material inequality undermines community, we could solve that problem by having people of significantly different levels of income form separate communities. Just as Hutterites might live here while Jewish kibbutzniks might live there, the rich could live in one place and be in community with one another, the upper middle class might live in a second place and be in community with one another, and so on, down to the poor. (Indeed, as the conservative sociologist Charles Murray (2012) complains, this is more or less what is happening in the United States.)

In summary, Cohen thinks differences in income or wealth can translate into differences in life experiences, which in turn make us alien to one another and thus undermine community. That seems right; such differences can indeed do that. But a whole host of other differences and inequalities in taste, ability, and so on, can do so. Many of them are much more threatening to community than differences in wealth. If so, then Cohen's community principle should regard these other inequalities and differences as 'repugnant' to socialists. Cohen cannot escape this objection by saying that his ideal of socialism allows for external diversity among communities that are internally not-diverse. This response would imply that radical material inequality could also be unproblematic, provided rich and poor segregate themselves into different communities.

It thus does not appear that Cohen's principle of community can do the work he needs it to do, at least not without having a host of implications most of us would reject. What made Cohen's *Why No Socialism?* so powerful was its Singer-esque appeal to commonsense moral intuitions to generate interesting, less commonsensical conclusions. However, on further consideration, Cohen's principle of community is far less appealing than it initially seems. If it is strictly egalitarian, it not only forbids differences in wealth; it forbids differences and diversity in general.

## 5. Beneficence and Community

As I mentioned above, there seems to be another, less developed strand in Cohen's argument. A few sentences suggest that he believes inequality is a threat to community because these inequalities tend to indicate or result from failures of beneficence. Cohen's argument seems to be something like this:

1. If I have more money than you, then (probably) I could have done something to help you, but chose not to do so.
2. Therefore, (probably) I was not as beneficent as I could have been.
3. Therefore, (probably) I will not be in full community with you.

Consider a case illustrating such a failure to help. I make more money than my twin brother does. He drives a ratty old rust-bucket; I drive an entry-level luxury sports sedan. Recently his car broke down. I did not offer to help him repair the car, even though he is my twin brother, with whom I shared a womb for 9 months and a nursery for many years. But I could have helped him. Instead of buying my fancy car, I could have purchased two reliable economy cars. My brother and I would then both have reliable transportation to work. Cohen might conclude that we would be in better community with each other, not because our life experiences would then be more similar—we already dealt with this argument in the previous section—but because there would be no failures of beneficence.

Since Cohen's argument here is just suggestive—he does not develop it much—it is unclear whether he intends the argument to be conceptual or empirical. To say it is a conceptual argument is to say that community is by definition something reduced whenever there is a failure to act beneficently. To say it is an empirical argument is to say that whenever a person fails to act beneficently, this will tend to cause others to feel somewhat alienated from him or resentful toward him.

Let us start by assuming the argument is making an empirical claim. In the case of my brother and his lousy car, my failure to pay for his car troubles does not cause him to resent me or feel alienated from me. On the contrary, he would take it as an insult—as degrading his sense of personal responsibility or as patronizing—were I to offer to buy him a more reliable car. Similarly, he would be insulted if I were to offer to split with him all income I earn over his. At least in this case, even though I could help my brother (in virtue of my higher income), this does not cause any alienation or lack of community, because my brother does not think I *owe* him half or any of my extra income. Instead, he thinks I should help him only in special circumstances, not merely because I could help.

Similarly, I am good friends with some more senior faculty, some of whom make significantly more money than I do. They could have helped me, say, make a down payment on my house, but did not. This does not cause me to resent them or feel alienated from them, nor does it undermine our friendship, because I do not believe they *owe* me this kind of help. Indeed, I do not even want it.

These points generalize: Suppose Ann has more than Bob. Because Ann has more than Bob, Ann could help Bob overcome some challenge. But suppose Ann

chooses not to do so. Whether this impedes community between Ann and Bob is contingent upon about their beliefs about what they owe to each other. Was it within Ann's reasonable personal prerogative to choose not to help? Did Ann owe assistance to Bob? Did Bob have a duty of personal responsibility to face this alone? Was Ann justified in failing to help Bob because Ann had a greater duty to help even worse off person Charlie?

If we interpret Cohen's argument as empirical, then we cannot just assume that choosing not to help those with less will always or even usually tend to reduce community. Instead, it will only do so if the people in that community subscribe to extremely demanding principles of interpersonal charity, or if they are already radically egalitarian. So, this kind of empirical argument will not do the work Cohen needs it to do, because it applies only to those who already share Cohen's moral beliefs. Cohenites might regard all failures to assist one another as undermining their community, but that is only because Cohenites are already radically egalitarian.

Alternatively, Cohen could intend to make conceptual rather than an empirical argument. He might argue as follows:

1. By definition, a society enjoys full community only if its members display proper beneficence to one another.
2. If one person has more than another, and, as a result of having more, could help the second person, but does not, then that person fails to display full beneficence.
3. Therefore, in any society in which inequalities obtain and in which people could have helped each other but did not, full community does not obtain.

The problem here is that this argument would beg the question. Premise 2 presupposes a rather controversial view of what people owe to one another. This argument does not prove that equality is required for proper beneficence; it presupposes it. This conceptual kind of argument will not do the work Cohen needs it to do, because it presupposes rather than provides evidence for the view that community requires equality.

Suppose two parents have an excellent relationship with their children, a relationship as excellent as any that has ever obtained in the history of the world. The family lives by principles of mutual reciprocity, of mutual concern, and mutual respect. They tolerate and celebrate differences among themselves, and yet still come together in love, strengthened rather than hindered by their differences. When someone needs and deserves help, everyone is happy to pitch in. At the same time, the family lives by principles of personal responsibility. No one makes himself the object of charity by choice, and everyone works hard to ensure that the other family members are better off with him.

It seems, on reflection, that such a family could realize full community with each other even if, at the end, the parents remain richer than the children, or if the children become richer than their parents, or if one sibling becomes richer than the others. It would remain true that the person with the most money could always do something more to assist those with less, but it is unclear any moral duty has been violated, or even that any ideal of family life fails to obtain.

Now, perhaps the family is in some way repugnant or defective, and I simply fail to see why. However, Cohen has not yet shown us just what is wrong with the family. I can see that he would judge them as defective, because they do not always help each other, but I do not yet know why they must always help each other. I do not mean that as a definitive refutation of Cohen's argument, but, rather, to show that he needs further work to get us to his egalitarian conclusion.

On this sort of point, Cohen quotes John Rawls, who says, "Members of a family do not commonly wish to gain unless they can do so in ways that further the interests of the rest".<sup>7</sup> Rawls asserts this not in defense of strict equality, but in defense of the difference principle. (Cohen of course rejects the difference principle because it allows for massive inequality.) However, Cohen cites this point in support of an egalitarian family ideal, even if he recognizes it does not quite get us to strict egalitarianism.

But there are a few problems with Rawls's assertion. It appears to be an empirical, sociological claim about what people in fact want. To know whether it is true, we would need to see proper empirical evidence that this is in fact how members of families think. Further, even if families do turn out to think this way, is unclear that they *should*. Generally, I prefer that my children gain before I gain. But I accept the Pareto Principle. If there is a way for someone to gain that does not hurt anyone, I am all for it. So, suppose a genie said to me, 'I can make one random member of you family immensely better off in some way (in a way that does not directly help any of the rest of you but also does not harm you), or I can do nothing. Which do you prefer?' I think the only the first answer is morally acceptable.

Or, suppose I am on Cohen's camping trip with the other socialist campers. We brought delicious chocolate bars for everyone, but a bear has eaten all but one bite-sized bar. What should we do?

We might decide to throw it out, since not everyone can have a bar. Another option would be to have a lottery to determine who gets it. As a benevolent person, a person who cares about other people's welfare, I would rather somebody eat it than that the bar go to waste. I would hope Cohen would agree. Cohen tries hard to avoid advocating a level-down equality; he wants his egalitarianism to be humanistic rather than anti-humanistic, to be pro rather than anti-welfare. However, since Cohen despises option luck, he might well believe we should destroy the bar. Cohen might be a leveling-down egalitarian after all.

Cohen might agree that benevolent campers would be happy for the person who wins the prize. We would be glad that someone got to enjoy it even if most of us could not. But, at the same time, Cohen seems to think that the winner would refuse to eat the bar, and would instead throw it out, because the winner would not want to be cut off from our common life, and would not want to gain if not all of us can gain. But there is something paradoxical about this. The winner knows that we losers, being benevolent community members who care about her, want her to enjoy the bar. We would be irritated for her to throw it out. Is there not some way for her to enjoy it without being 'cut off' from our community life? I will discuss one possibility in the next section.

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<sup>7</sup> Cohen 2000, 134, quoting Rawls 1971, 105.

## 6. Vicarious Enjoyment

Community is a good thing, though not the only good thing, or even the best thing. As we saw above, Cohen's camping trip thought experiment shows us that most of us value community deeply, but it does not thereby show us that we are committed to Cohen's principle of community. Upon further reflection, Cohen's principle of community has implications few of us would be willing to endorse. Cohen says that differences in wealth can bring us apart, but so can other differences. Inequalities in abilities, tastes, preferences, ideas, religious views, and conceptions of the good are just as much threats to community, as Cohen defines it, as inequalities in wealth. It appears that Cohen's principle of community leaves little room for diversity or pluralism within communities. Further, Cohen's egalitarianism might run afoul of the Pareto Principle; it might recommend that we destroy something that can benefit only one person simply because not all can enjoy it.

In this final substantive section, I want to make a case for pluralism and diversity *within* communities. I want to explain how a morally proper community can overcome the 'problem' of diversity. Further, I want to explain a mechanism by which a community can avoid running afoul of the Pareto Principle.

Recall the example above, in which only one person could have a piece of chocolate. Cohen, who is opposed to option luck, might think it better that we destroy the bar than that we distribute it via a lottery. After all, if one person enjoys a gain that the others do not, she is cut off from our common life.

But there is way for us all to benefit from her personal gain. Consider a real-life example. I once had a colleague who, to control her weight, would only eat white fish, beans, and other plain foods. (She had been morbidly obese, but became thin by imposing strict dietary discipline upon herself.) We were at a dinner together. The waiter distributed the dessert menu. I normally prefer not to eat a dessert by myself while my dinner companion does not. In a Cohenesque fashion, I prefer eating desert to be a communal experience. But my colleague made a surprising request: 'Would you please get that chocolate cake, and then *describe it to me?* I can't eat that anymore, but I can live vicariously through you, if you can just make the experience vivid enough.' I ordered the cake and crudely described the first bite. 'It's, um, very rich.' She chided me, 'Oh, come one, you can do better than that'. By the last bite, I was writing food poetry, and she was well satisfied. Rather than being cut off from one another, we *shared* in the experience, even though I was the only one actually eating cake.

Similar remarks apply to other kinds of differences. Pluralism and diversity are a type of inequality, and, as we discussed above, they are just as strong threats to community as inequality in wealth and income. Liberals sometimes say that justice requires we tolerate such differences, though they might agree, as communitarians (and Cohen) complain, that such differences cut us off from common life and make us strangers to one another. But there is an alternative. Instead of simply tolerating each other, we can practice what Loren Lomasky calls "*toleration as vicarious achievement*":

“If the people around you are leading diverse lives, many of which are responsive to genuine goods—albeit not the ones that provide a major thrust to the activities in your own life—then the society you share with them is better for their presence. But for that same reason, *you* are better for their presence. You can *epistemically* be made aware of the variousness of the springs of worthwhile human action [...]. There are also *affective* gains to be had insofar as one is inspired, uplifted, or merely entertained by episodes from others' biographies. [...] we might say there are *spiritual* gains to be had by voluntarily identifying with others whose projects differ substantially from our own. By freely taking on a valuational stake in their lives, one achieves indirect association with goods to which one has no direct practical connection, goods from which one would otherwise be altogether exiled. Free-riding on the commitments and concerns of others widens and deepens one's links that that which is worthwhile.” (Lomasky 2002, 71–2)

The idea here is that there is a plurality of worthwhile goods, projects, and modes of living, but these cannot all be realized in or achieved by just one human life. To realize all these goods and worthwhile projects, we need pluralism, i.e., we need people to live very different lives. Such diversity *could* cut us off from one another. But it could also instead allow us to live richer lives than we otherwise might. By making ourselves and our differences public, we can live vicariously through others. As individuals, we can share in one another's experiences. As we see them lead their very different lives, we can empathize with them, and, in a sense, get inside their minds.

For instance, though I am secular, individualist, liberal atheist, I can see great value in the life of a Cistercian monk, value that I cannot realize in my own life directly. Rather than viewing the monks as aliens with whom I cannot form community, I can, upon seeing or reading about how they live, come to share somewhat in the goods they realize through their separate lives and projects. This applies to differences in wealth, too. An ascetic and a bon vivant realize different goods, and they can each gain from reflecting on the others' otherwise alien form of life. Our profound differences—and thus profound inequalities—are not *repugnant* because they cut us off from one another, but can be pleasing because they allow us each to better realize all the possible forms of the good life.

Cohen seems obligated to agree. First, he relies upon this very kind of empathy to motivate us to accept his socialist ideal. After all, he argues for socialism by presenting us with a form of life—the socialist camping trip—that his readers have at best only partial experience with. But they see the value in it precisely because people can and do have the ability to see through alien perspectives and vicariously experience alien forms of life.

Second, Cohen has continually argued that we should not dumb down our moral standards to accommodate the badness of human nature. People *can* empathize with one another and come to appreciate each others' differences

in the way that Lomasky describes. It takes some effort—reading literature, engaging in imaginative exercises, talking to others, watching documentaries—but they can do it. Perhaps many or even most people *will* not, but as Cohen repeatedly reminds us, “will not” does not imply “cannot” (Cohen 2008, 170–7).

## 7. Conclusion

Cohen’s *Why Not Socialism?* makes a compelling case that a kind of socialist community can be an excellent form of life, if not a compelling case that it is the best form of life. Yet however compelling this socialist community might be, it provides little intuitive evidence in favor of Cohen’s preferred moral principles.

Cohen’s principle of community, a strongly egalitarian principle seems appealing at first glance. However, further reflection shows this principle has many repulsive implications. For the principle of community to support Cohen’s strongly egalitarian conclusions, the principle must not only forbid inequalities of wealth, but most forbid most other differences, differences we not only have no reason to reject, but differences we have every reason to celebrate. In the end, if Cohen’s principle of community is strongly egalitarian, it permits at best a stunted form of community.

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