

**Exploitation and Unfreedom: The Structure and
Justification of Exploitation Theory.**

By

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I began this project with two hopes; to gain a better understanding of exploitation along with what it means to be both the exploiter and the exploited, as well as to justify my motivation for doing so—whether or not I or anyone ought to have an interest in exploitation theory, so to speak.¹ To gain a better understanding of exploitation theory, I first turn to the work of John Roemer and his essay, “Should Marxists be Interested in Exploitation,” to provide a detailed analysis of the Marxian notion of exploitation. The first section of my paper comprises two elements. One is an exposition of exploitation theory as Roemer defines it. The second is an attempt to establish criteria for determining possible exploitative states of affairs—criteria which come in the form of conditions that must be met as a prerequisite before any state of affairs could be dubbed ‘exploitative’. I also include (as part of the first element) explanations of Roemer’s arguments against any potential justifications for our interest in exploitation. He believes that while exploitation is of interest, the justification of this interest cannot be found within critical political or economic theory. He defends this claim via a detailed dismantling of the four most likely justifications that could fuel our interest in exploitation theory. He concludes that these justifications are inadequate and that an interest in the political conception of exploitation is therefore unjustified. I, however, believe that exploitation can be a justified interest in the political arena. Therefore, the

¹ The justification for my interest is required if I wish to use exploitation theory as a springboard for a further critique of any political theory. Justification (of some sort) is also required if I am to demonstrate the relevance of the project in question.

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ultimate aim of my project is to justify exploitation theory on a moral foundation by appealing to both moral and political justifications.² To do this, I turn in the second section of the paper to the work of G.A. Cohen and his essay, “The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom,” where I utilize Cohen’s conception of exploitation and collective unfreedom to substantiate my claim and justify exploitation theory on moral and political grounds. It is to the explication of Roemer’s critique of the justifications that I now turn.

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Roemer begins his critique by adopting the Marxian definition of exploitation; namely, that exploitation is “the unequal exchange of labour for goods.”³ Roemer writes that the exchange is unequal when the amount of labor embodied in the goods which the worker/individual can purchase with his income is less than the amount of labor he expended to earn that income. He writes that exploitation, as so defined, is a feature of the pattern of redistribution of labor that occurs through the process of citizens trading their individual labor for social labor that is embodied in the goods for which they have traded. Roemer states that since all goods are productions of labor, all goods “are vessels of labor”⁴ and exploitation can be discerned through a comparison of the individual’s personal expenditure of labor with the amount of ‘labor’ they get back in the goods/vessels. To illustrate, imagine a situation where a gardener is paid for lawn work

² This potential justification, Roemer says, is the only possible justification that exploitation has left, though he neither substantiates this claim nor does he attempt to refute it. Thus, my project should not be seen as a potential refutation of Roemer’s but as an addition to it, with a slight alteration. Roemer believes that it is possible to justify exploitation through morality, though by doing so, it removes exploitation theory from the field of politics and moves it into the field of sociology. I believe that the justification I discovered in the work of Cohen more than adequately does the job and also keeps exploitation theory firmly within the field of politics. It is this claim I also wish to substantiate.

³ Roemer, John, “Should Marxists be Interested in Exploitation?” in *Analytical Marxism: Studies in Marxism and Social Theory*, ed. John Roemer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) p.262.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.261.

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with leather gloves. Imagine that it takes a single individual two hours to fully rake a lawn and dispose of the leaves. For this work the individual is paid with two pairs of gloves. Further, imagine that it takes the glove-maker who employs the gardener less than two hours to produce the gloves that he/she intends to pay the gardener with—let's say that it only takes one hour to produce two pairs of gloves. Since the gardener does two hours of work, a non-exploitative situation requires that the gardener receive four pairs of gloves, the amount of gloves that two hours of work would produce. Thus, the gardener's situation is exploitative in the sense that he/she produces two hours of labor and only gets paid with one hour of the glove-maker's labor. Roemer further stipulates the definition of exploitation in that the situation 'A exploits B' is inaccurate, whereas 'A is an exploiter' and 'B is exploited' depicts a more accurate example of exploitation.⁵ Based on this, we can further state that exploitation refers to the relationship between an individual and society as a whole as measured by the transfer of the individual's labor to the society and the reverse transfer of society's labor to the person as embodied in the goods that individual claims.⁶ Using the definition of exploitation provided by Roemer, I now move into a discussion of the four possible justifications for our interest in exploitation theory.

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Accumulation Theory

Roemer begins his critique of possible justification for our interest in exploitation by citing the claim that the exploitation of workers' labor "explains the profits that

⁵ Ibid. p.261.

⁶ Ibid. p.265.

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capitalists acquire”⁷ through the act of accumulated surplus labor. He first attacks the notion that our interest in examining exploitation lies in the fact that exploitation of labor is supposed to *explain* capitalistic expansion, accumulation, and profits. More precisely, he refutes the validity of this theory on the grounds that the definition of exploitation that seems to be needed as a foundation for this theory is not the definition of exploitation that is going to properly justify our interest in exploitation theory. He defends this claim by stating that the accumulation theory uses exploitation in the Marxian sense of “to turn a natural resource to economic account” while our interest in exploitation seems to be concerned with whether or not individual workers are unjustly and unfairly treated for another’s personal gain and profit. Furthermore, exploitation of individual labor, even when used in the required Marxian sense, is still unable to explain accumulation and profits due to the fact that all commodities are exploited under capitalism, and not just individual labor. Roemer writes that Marxists assume fallaciously⁸ that the exploitation of labor is the primary source of capitalist profits because capitalists can produce profits by exploiting any commodity. He writes that it is just as plausible to insert oil or corn for the “value numeraire.” If we do that, we would still get the same explanation for capitalist profits from the exploitation of oil or corn that we would receive from the exploitation of labor.⁹ Roemer concludes that while the concept of exploitation seems to be vital in the explanation of capitalist accumulation, profit, and expansion, it is impossible to posit any particular type of exploitation (such as the exploitation of labor) as being any more to blame than any other type of exploitation (the exploitation of oil or

⁷ Ibid. p.265.

⁸ The fallacy exists, Roemer writes, in the inference made in the Fundamental Marxian Theorem, where profits are said to be explained via accumulated exploitation of labor.

⁹ Ibid. p.265.

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corn). Therefore, if our interest in exploitation theory is justified via our hopes of explaining capitalist expansion, then the notion of exploitation of labor is incapable to doing the job simply because all things equally have the potential to be exploited in a capitalist society.

Domination Theory

In his critique of domination theory, Roemer states that if exploitation entails the domination of workers by capitalists, and, since domination is an “unjust act,” then exploitation theory will be able to provide a foundation for a broader theory concerning the injustice of capitalism.¹⁰ If this can be successfully demonstrated, then we will have also provided a justification for our interest in exploitation. Thus, if we can demonstrate a viable equality-based interest in domination based on the fact that it arises out of exploitative situations, then our motivation for interest in exploitation theory is justified on grounds that exploitation brings about unjust and subjugated states of affairs for the worker.

Roemer begins by distinguishing between two notions of domination: Domination I is defined as the “maintenance and enforcement of private property in the means of production.”¹¹ Domination II, on the other hand, is defined as “domination [of the worker] at the point of production,” or, the “hierarchal and autocratic structure of work.”¹² Roemer claims that while both of these conceptions of domination imply exploitation, the same cannot be said of the converse of the statement; namely, that exploitation does not necessarily lead to either conception of domination. He defends

¹⁰ Ibid. p.266.

¹¹ Ibid. p.267.

¹² Ibid. p.267.

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this claim by carefully examining both conceptions of domination in turn. The purpose of Domination I is to enforce the entrenched pattern of distribution and accumulation of any given capitalist society. Thus, the underlying reason for studying Domination II is to gain a better understanding of the existing inequality of ownership in the means of production relationship that exists between capitalists and workers. From this perspective, workers are dominated in the sense that the capitalists own the vast majority of the means of production and all the worker can be said to possess is his labor-power. The situation is dominating in that the worker has no access to any form of resource/capital with which he/she may use to produce any valuable commodity, and the private property-owning capitalist continues this situation by disallowing the worker any opportunity to access this capital. Roemer writes that it is clear that we are no longer dealing with the exploitation of labor, because we are now dealing with a more fundamental notion of differential ownership that actually brings about the exploitation of individual labor.¹³ Therefore, if Domination I—the unequal ownership of the means of production—must already be in place before an investigation of exploitation of labor can even begin, then our interest in exploitation cannot possibly hope to find justification in what is now seen as a more fundamental theory regarding the unequal distribution of resources. Therefore, if we are to accept this critique as valid, then we are forced to move on and take a closer look at Domination II.

Recall that Roemer's definition for Domination II dealt with the autocratic work-structure of capitalist societies. Here he is concerned with the “domination of the self of the worker...in relation [to the] subordination he enters into with the capitalist when he

¹³ While this seems to be a potentially volatile claim, it is one I will return to in my critique.

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enters the workplace.”¹⁴ So, if Domination II is to be our justification for our interest in exploitation, it then becomes necessary to demonstrate how exploitation gives rise to the domination of the worker by the capitalist-structured workplace. Roemer says that this is impossible. It is impossible, he states, because the “direction of entailment runs the wrong way.”¹⁵ Or, in other words, Roemer believes that it is the existence of Domination II that gives rise to the exploitation of labor, and not the other way around. More simplistically, Roemer believes that domination must be in place before exploitation can occur. This is so, he believes, because “...the class and exploitation relations of capitalist economy using labor markets can be precisely replicated with a capitalist economy using credit markets, where domination II does not exist.”¹⁶ First, remember that:

In Labour Market Capitalism, agents optimize, given their endowments of property, and end up choosing either to sell labour-power or to hire labour-power...The Class Exploitation Correspondence Principle¹⁷ demonstrates that everyone who optimizes by selling labour-power is exploited, and everyone who optimizes by hiring labour-power is an exploiter.¹⁸

From this quotation, it is easy to see that labor market capitalism is nothing more than the same type of capitalism I have been referring to throughout this essay. Essentially, it is a system where capitalists own the means of production and workers own their labor-power and nothing more. What is important about this quotation is that Roemer now makes the distinction between labor market capitalism and credit market capitalism:

In Credit Market Capitalism, there is no labour market, but a market for lending capital at an interest rate...some agents will lend capital and some will borrow capital. Again, the Class Exploitation Correspondence

¹⁴ Ibid. p.267.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.267.

¹⁶ Ibid. p.268.

¹⁷ The Class Exploitation Correspondence Principle is in reference to Roemer’s article “New Directions in the Marxian Theory of exploitation and Class,” in *Analytical Marxism*. For the purposes of this paper, the validity of the principle has been presupposed.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.268.

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Principle holds: any agent who optimizes by lending capital will be an exploiter and any agent who optimizes by borrowing capital will turn out to be exploited.¹⁹

Now this is an interesting twist. Roemer is describing a situation where there is exploitation that clearly does not entail any Domination II. He justifies this claim by demonstrating that exploitation arises even in a capitalist credit market where there is no labor market to dominate. There will be exploitation—the capitalist lender is the exploiter and the capital borrower is the exploited—but there will not be any Domination II because there is no subjugated, alienated working class. This is so because in labor market capitalism, the Domination II is obvious: workers are subjugated to the power of the capitalists if for no other reason than that capitalists have sole possession of the means of production. The point is simply that, in dealing with the capitalist labor market, the pre-existing Domination II is clearly not dependent upon any form of exploitation of labor—the Domination II exists even before exploitation of any kind is even questioned. The point becomes even clearer when we examine Roemer’s notion of credit markets. From the quotation above, we learn that credit markets can exist in such a way so as to be completely without any form of labor. Individuals either lend or borrow capital and nothing more. Yet, even in this situation, the borrowers will always be exploited. The borrowers, however, while being continuously exploited, are not dominated (using either sense of the word) because for there to be domination there needs to be a labor market in place. Thus, if our interest lies in the injustice of domination, then there “is no reason to run the circuitous route of exploitation theory to make the point.”²⁰ Because Roemer has described one situation in which domination brings about exploitation and another

¹⁹ Ibid. p.268.

²⁰ Ibid. p.270.

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situation in which exploitation exists but does not bring about domination, he concludes that our interest in exploitation theory cannot be justified by an appeal to domination.

Alienation Theory

For alienation theory to provide an adequate justification for our interest in exploitation, then alienation, as an unjust act, must remain independent of any appeal to domination or to differential ownership. Further, if exploitation is to be justified through alienation, then this alienation must exhibit differential treatment and it must cause an obvious disparity among certain groups over others. To clear the ground, Roemer writes that alienation occurs when an individual worker produces goods for exchange and not for personal use either by him/herself or by his/her community. Workers are alienated from their capacity to create, produce, and sustain themselves by being unable to work for themselves to achieve their own unique ends. We can easily imagine this situation arising in any type of factory work. Whereas once the worker labored on a familial/communal farm to produce goods for personal consumption or for trade within the community, now the worker labors on an assembly line assisting others in producing goods the worker cares nothing for. In the former situation, the worker freely worked the land producing goods by him/herself, whereas now the worker has nothing to show for his/her labor except a paycheck.²¹ The situation becomes even clearer if we imagine a pottery-maker first working for herself and then working in an alienating factory. We imagine the pottery-maker diligently producing pots for local trade and personal use. She takes pride in her work because it is what she is good at doing. Even more important, she enjoys her work because it gives her pleasure to know that she and others benefit from

²¹ The genesis of this idea, I believe, is with Marx's critique of capitalism, though the situation may be a bit different.

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her artistic ability and her superior craftsmanship. Now imagine this same artisan being placed into a factory setting. Instead of creating each pot from scratch, now her responsibility is to machine-shape the lids of the same pot all day long—she no longer gets to shape the pot, to glaze the clay, nor to fire the finished product: her sole responsibility is to machine-shape lids. Marx and Roemer believe that indeed this situation is alienating. She can no longer be happy with her labor because she is no longer doing what she loves doing—making pots from scratch and trading them in the local market. She no longer cares for the pots because they are no longer her creation. In fact, she cannot even take pride in the lids simply because she is only assisting others in their assembly-line production of the lids. Essentially, the work is alienating because the artisan no longer has anything to show for her work—she has been separated from her creative capacity and she no longer has any reason to enjoy her time spent at work. Thus, if we are to show that our interest in exploitation is justified on the fact that exploitation of labor brings about differential alienation, then we must demonstrate how exploitation of labor is the cause of differential alienation. It should come as no surprise that Roemer believes this to be impossible.

Roemer critiques this hypothesis by appealing to another thought experiment, one involving two men, Adam and Karl. Each man is equipped “with equal endowments of resources,” but both have different and unique preferences. By appealing to the notion of differential preferences, Roemer describes a situation in which the men will voluntarily enter into “relations of differential alienation.” In doing so, he undermines the argument that exploitation is the cause of alienation.²² Imagine that each man begins the first week

²² Ibid. p.271.

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with identical resources: 1 bushel of corn. Likewise, both men need the same amount of resources to sustain themselves: 1 bushel per week. It should be known that Karl is reluctant to work more than what is required to sustain himself week to week; thus, Karl must labor to produce 1 bushels of corn after the initial week.²³ Adam, on the other hand, is willing to work hard in the first week in hopes of gaining a payoff that will allow him the opportunity to forgo work permanently. Without getting too bogged down with the intricacies of Roemer's thought experiment, Karl's situation is one where he must work 3 days on a familial farm and a 1 day in a factory to produce enough to sustain himself each week and to have enough resources to begin the next week (1 bushels).²⁴ Adam, however, works his 1 day in the factory plus 4 days on the farm to produce enough to sustain himself as well as a surplus for use the following week (2 bushels). Karl realizes that instead of working on the farm for 3 days, Karl can borrow Adam's 1 bushel surplus and work in the factory his usual two days per week (without even utilizing the inferior farm technology) and produce both his 1 bushels plus 2 bushels he uses to pay back Adam's 1 he borrowed plus 1 bushel of interest. Thus, Karl works as little as possible such as he desired and Adam no longer has to work at all after the initial week of full-time labor, according to his desire. Thus, in this situation, there is both exploitation and differential alienation, but the point is that both men willingly agreed to engage in this situation because it best suited their needs and preferences. Also, "exploitation cannot be blamed, in this story, on differential initial ownership of the means of production" because both men started out with the same amount of resources. So, as Roemer sees it, differential alienation is not always unjust and neither is it brought

²³ Roemer stipulates that using farm technology, three day's labor produces 1 bushel of corn and one day of factory work plus 1 bushel of seed corn produces 2 bushels of corn.

²⁴ Ibid. p.272.

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about solely by the exploitation of labor, for in this case it was brought about as the most efficient means to accommodate the preferences of the men in question (within the capitalist system). From here Roemer quickly moves into a discussion of the last of the possible justifications of exploitation: exploitation-as-differential-ownership.

Differential Ownership Theory

Roemer writes that if justification is to be found for our interest in exploitation theory, then we must prove that “the existence of exploitation is equivalent to inequality in the distribution of initial assets.”²⁵ Thus, if it is argued elsewhere that the inequality of initial assets is unjust, and if it is successfully argued that exploitation of labor is equivalent to inequality of assets, then we can safely assert that exploitation is itself unjust and also worthy of our interest and study. Of course, Roemer believes this process to be a hopeless one. In fact, he writes that “in the general case, exploitation theory leads to results which may conflict directly with the inequality-of-productive-assets theory.”²⁶

Roemer defends this claim with his weakest critique yet. He states that preferences in individuals can be manipulated in such a way so that the asset-rich are exploited by the asset-poor. He asks us to imagine the situation as before with Karl and Adam, yet the initial distribution is no longer equal: Karl has 1 bushel of corn and Adam has 3. In a similar fashion, Karl can utilize his initial 1 bushel of corn in the factory and produce 2 bushels of corn, one for consumption and one for utilizing the following week. Similarly, Adam can spend three days in the factory using his initial 3 bushels and end

²⁵ Ibid. p.274.

²⁶ Ibid. p.274. Roemer also claims that this hypothesis weakens the traditional Marxian notion of exploitation of labor critique and that it does not provide a proper account of Marxian sentiments. Roemer believes that Marx’s critique was forged to bring about equality in the realm of distribution of productive assets and not for the “elimination of exploitation.”

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the week with 6 bushels, 3 for consumption and 3 for the following week. Now Roemer writes that if Karl were willing to consume only $\frac{2}{3}$ of a bushel of corn and not have to work—which would make Karl happier—then Karl could loan his initial bushel to Adam and Adam could work 4 bushels in the factory and produce 8 bushels. Adam would then pay back Karl his 1 bushel plus interest of $\frac{2}{3}$ of a bushel²⁷ and would then have 6 and $\frac{1}{3}$ bushels remaining. After Adam replaces his initial 3 bushels, he still has 3 and $\frac{1}{3}$ for consumption and this situation suits his preferences well.²⁸ From this, we see that Karl, the one with the least resources, is exploiting Adam, the individual with the most resources. Thus, Roemer asks on what basis can we condemn this exploitative relationship? He writes that we cannot condemn it on grounds of unequal distribution of initial resources because the exploiter is endowed with fewer resources than the exploited in this case. He concludes that:

...when exploitation accounts reflect the unequal distribution of productive assets in the proper way (that the rich exploit the poor), that is what makes exploitation theory attractive. But if that correlation can fail, as it has, then no foundation remains for a justification of exploitation theory.²⁹

With this statement, Roemer finishes his critique of the final possible justification. In closing, Roemer believes that he has portrayed the four most probable justifications for our interest in exploitation theory in the best possible light and that, even then, our interest in exploitation still cannot be justified.

²⁷ This interest is given at a competitive rate because it is the amount of corn that Karl could produce by himself by working his seed corn one day on the farm.

²⁸ A quick aside: why would Adam want to work an extra day for only a third extra bushel of corn? And why would Adam be forced to borrow from Karl when he could easily work for that $\frac{1}{3}$ bushel on the farm for one day? What is Adam's motivation for borrowing from Karl?

²⁹ Ibid. p.277.

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However, Roemer is quick to point out that while our interest in exploitation theory is unjustifiable, it is not because exploitation as a diagnostic theory is worthless; rather it is because we cannot apply exploitation theory solely as a critical analysis of economic theory as it misconstrues the definition and purpose of exploitation. Thus, Roemer suggests that exploitation theory be regarded as a “provocative social theory” which would most likely entail a re-examination of exploitation and of what it is to be both exploiter and exploited. Roemer provides a glimpse of what this new definition may look like in the closing paragraph of his essay. He writes:

I think exploitation conceived of as the unequal exchange of labour should be replaced with exploitation conceived of as the distributional consequences of an unjust inequality in the distribution of productive assets and resources.³⁰

Though he does not elaborate any further in this essay, it is to the explication of this re-conception of exploitation that I now turn.

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If we are to proceed by conceptualizing exploitation as the equivalent of the inequality in the distribution of productive assets and resources, then we must demonstrate that unequal distribution is unjust, that workers are unjustly treated, and that this unjust treatment is the result of exploitation. To do this, we must; 1) defend a morality-based claim which states that the unequal distribution of resources is unjust; 2) we must demonstrate that the workers are unjustly forced into this situation and have no capability, as a collective body, to escape the exploitative situation, and, finally; 3) we must demonstrate how this injustice is an unavoidable consequence of the exploitative

³⁰ Ibid. p.281.

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state of affairs. To do this, I turn to Cohen's essay titled, "The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom."³¹

I must note that the purpose of Cohen's essay is not to argue for a justification of interest in exploitation theory. It is, however, directed towards conceptions of exploitation, worker freedom, and unequal distribution of assets, which I feel can be properly applied to defend my claim that the motivation of our interest in exploitation is both salvageable and properly justified by fulfilling the three criteria I stipulated above. To begin the demonstration, we first turn to the claim that all members of the working class are forced to sell their labor.³² If I can demonstrate that all members of the working class are forced to sell their labor, then I am in a position to argue that it is morally wrong to be forced to sell one's labor on grounds that the individual is being unjustly exploited,³³ that the individual is having freedoms taken away from him/her, and also that others are positively benefiting from his/her unjust situation.

What Cohen means by asserting the proposition that 'all workers are forced to sell their labor' is simply the fact that members of the working class have no other options except to enter into the capitalist-structured workplace.³⁴ Cohen goes on to explicate this proposition by stating that the notion of whether or not workers are forced to sell their labor is not a subjective claim, but that it is an objective situation concerning the relationship between capitalists and workers. This objective situation, according to Cohen, is not brought about "because of his [the worker's] attitude to himself, his level of

³¹ Cohen, G.A., "The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom," in *Analytical Marxism*.

³² This is a Marxian notion concerning the proletariat's position in capitalist relations of production.

³³ This is an appeal to Roemer's definition of exploitation of labor: the individual is exchanging more of his labor-power than he is receiving back from society's goods.

³⁴ This, for reasons that will become evident, is a bad situation for the worker. This is a bad situation because it possibly brings about the exploitation, domination, alienation, etc, that we have previously discussed.

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self-confidence, his cultural attainment...and it does not turn on his consciousness,”³⁵ but instead is brought about by the capitalist state of affairs in which the worker is situated. Thus, if we are to say that the worker is forced to sell his/her labor, then we are also stating that the worker has no *viable alternative* but to sell his/her own labor. Early on Cohen addresses this by critiquing the option brought against his theory by some who state that the worker, instead of selling his/her labor, can choose many other options, such as begging for money or choosing to starve to death, or simply trusting in good fortune. Thus Cohen makes the distinction between alternatives that are viable against alternatives that are not: clearly starving or begging are not viable alternatives to selling one’s labor. Thus, he considers the critique to be an invalid assessment of his theory. Therefore, in understanding that person P is forced to do event E, is to understand that P has no other options but to do E and that E is caused by external influences over which he/she has no direct control.

Once this is understood, Cohen then makes a further distinction by claiming that only in a situation where there is an unequal distribution of productive assets can a state of affairs obtain in which workers are forced to sell their labor—he calls this the standard exercise of power. The standard exercise of power is nothing more than the consequence of unequal distribution in that capitalists own the means of production and workers only possess their labor-power thereby lacking any productive assets with which the worker could put his/her labor to good use: they are forced into selling their labor-power because they have no alternative. He writes:

The relations of production of a society may be identified with the powers its differently situated persons have with respect to the society’s

³⁵ Cohen, p. 239.

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productive forces, that is, the labor capacities of its producers and the means of production they use...a worker is forced to sell his labour-power in the presently required sense if and only if the constraint is a result of standard exercises of the powers constituting relations of production.³⁶

With that, we can safely assert that person P is forced to do event E when P is a member of a social class of individuals who have been subjected to unequal distribution of productive resources as well as being denied equal access to the means of production and P has no choice but to perform E in order to survive in the capitalist society.³⁷ A common critique of this hypothesis is that while it may be true that person P is forced to sell his/her labor, it is not true that P is forced to remain in the working class that forces him/her to do so. Thus, this critique is not attacking the notion that workers are forced to sell their labor, but it is attacking the notion that workers are forced to remain workers. However, through inference, it is clear that if workers are not forced to remain workers, then workers are not actually forced to sell their labor because they can always choose to escape out of the subjugated working class. Cohen does not believe this critique to be valid. He begins his response using a thought experiment that is analogous to the situation of the working class. Imagine ten people locked in a single room with only one key able to open the door. The room is analogous to the working class, the people locked in the room are the individual workers, and the key represents the means with which individuals workers can escape the working class. It must also be noted that only one

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Cohen also addresses the critique that in order for persons to be forced into performing a particular action X, then there must be another person forcing the former individual into performing X. It is an important critique, but unnecessary for my paper. However, I will quote his response here: "It might still be said, for a different reason, that if the structure of capitalism leaves the worker no choice but to sell his labour-power, then he is forced to do so by actions of persons. For the structure of capitalism is not in all senses self-sustaining. It is sustained by a great deal of deliberate human action, notably on the part of the state. And if, as I often think, the state functions on behalf of the capitalist class, then any structural constraint by virtue of which the worker must sell his labour-power has enough human will behind it to satisfy the stipulation that where there is force, there are forcing human beings." Ibid.

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individual may use the key and leave the room, and after that individual leaves, no other individual may attempt to exit. Now it is true that before anyone attempts to leave all are equally free to do so, so imagine that person P (which can be any one of the individuals) attempts to leave. Depending on P's effort, P can use the key and escape the room and, as a consequence of his/her actions, necessarily lock the other individuals in the room indefinitely. Cohen uses this thought experiment to illustrate the fact that while it may be possible for some workers to escape the working class and become "bourgeois capitalists," there are, necessarily, no more than a few possible exits. Turning back to the analogy, while one individual did escape, his/her escape did, in fact, force the other nine individuals to remain locked in the room. An interesting facet of this situation is the fact that, individually, each person in the room initially has an equal opportunity to obtain the key and exit. Thus, individually, no person in that room is forced to stay in the room. It is only when P decides to exercise his/her freedom that the others no longer have any choice and are forced to remain in the room. This is an interesting turn the experiment has shown us, and it is one to which I will return. First, however, I want to modify the experiment (similar to Cohen's) to demonstrate another interesting consequence. Instead of imagining the room containing one key, it now contains two, but everything else remains the same. The second key is not readily visible, but with a little effort and work by any individual to attempt to find another exit, the key will easily be found. So P exits the room and nine others are left to their fate, so to speak. Now for whatever reasons,³⁸

³⁸ While these reasons are not necessary for my argument, I will list Cohen's potential reasons that the workers may not want to leave their situation. 1) Although it is possible to escape, it is not easy, and often people do not attempt what is possible but hard. 2) "The dull compulsion of economic relations." Long occupancy of a subordinate class position nurtures the illusion that one's class is natural and inescapable. 3) Not all workers would like to be "petty bourgeois." 4) The notion of class solidarity would also be a force

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none of the remaining nine choose to look for another exit; thus, none of the nine can be said to be individually forced to remain in the locked room. This is so because, whether or not they know it, there is still another key in the room and all nine have an equal opportunity to find it if they so choose. Thus, according to this experiment, it is false to say that any of the persons locked in the room are forced to remain there. And from this analogy, we can argue that while the number of exits from the working class are necessarily small, it is very plausible that not all of the means of escape are “actively being attempted” by the workers, and, therefore, it *seems* false to state that all workers are forced to remain in the working class.

While this at first seems to be a damning counterexample to his theory, Cohen uses it to his advantage by expanding the previous thought experiment and introducing his theory of exploitation and collective unfreedom. He begins by discussing the notion of conditional freedom. Utilizing the initial thought experiment against itself, Cohen writes that while all are equally free to leave the room, they are not collectively free to leave the room—all ten people may not decide to get up as a collective body and leave the room. In fact, the only reason P was able to leave was because none of the others chose to act upon their individual freedom and leave, for if they had, P would then have been unable to exercise his freedom and leave. Cohen writes:

He [P] is free not only *because* none of the others tries to get the key, but *on condition* that they do not. Then *each is free only on condition that the others do not exercise their similarly conditional freedom*. Not more than one can exercise the liberty they all have. If, moreover, any one were to exercise it, then, because of the structure of the situation, all the others would lose it.³⁹

in keeping members of a class from trying to escape and thereby leaving their family/friends behind to suffer. Ibid. p.246.

³⁹ Ibid. p.244.

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From this statement, Cohen posits his theory of collective unfreedom. This theory is nothing more than the fact that, for all individuals in a similar situation, each person's freedom is contingent upon all others of the group. Thus we could state that "a group suffers collective unfreedom with respect to a type of action A if and only if performance of A by all members of the group is impossible."⁴⁰ What is fascinating about this notion, however, is the idea that individuals *seem* to possess more freedom when observed individually than when we examine the individuals as particular members of a group. Thus, as a group, the people in the locked room (members of the working class) suffer from collective unfreedom, in that an exercise of individual freedom negatively affects both the individual and the collective freedoms of all other members of the group. Essentially, when one member exercises his/her freedom, all other members lose their individual freedoms, or, as Cohen puts it, "collective unfreedom generates individual unfreedom."⁴¹ Cohen goes on to say that:

Returning to the proletariat, we can conclude, by parity of reasoning, that although most proletarians are free to escape the proletariat, and, indeed, even if everyone is, the proletariat is collectively unfree, an imprisoned class.

Thus, if we are to fully understand the forced situation of the working class, we must understand that the "genius of capitalist exploitation"⁴² is discovered within the notion of collective unfreedom. What is genius is the fact that workers need not be coerced into selling their labor individually simply because the coercion happens on a collective level and is the necessary consequence of the structure of capitalism. Out of necessity there must always be capitalists and workers—buyers and sellers—and there could not be a

⁴⁰ Ibid. p.248.

⁴¹ Ibid. p.250.

⁴² Ibid. p.245.

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functioning capitalist society where all of the workers are no longer workers but capitalists, or vice versa.⁴³

I believe that the reason Roemer was unable to justify our interest in exploitation theory through appeals to accumulation, domination, and alienation was because he was observing exploitation through too narrow a scope—he concentrated his efforts on examining the exploitation of individual workers—and the inadequacies of Roemer’s possible justifications were found to be inadequate on grounds that some workers in the working class were not subjected to individual exploitation. Thus, through the lens of collective unfreedom, we arrive at the notion of collective exploitation of the working class, and it is through this lens, that exploitation will be justified. For instance, by looking again at Roemer’s critique of accumulation theory, we see that capitalism thrives due to the fact of accumulated surplus. Exploitation-as-unequal-distribution explains both how capitalist accumulation is initially possible as well as the means by which the process of accumulation continues. Surplus is gained because part of the value of the product produced by the worker is necessarily expropriated by the capitalist. This expropriation is possible because of differential ownership and the fact that capitalists possess the means of production and the resources required to produce goods. Essentially, the worker must pay the capitalist to access the means of production, and this is solely because of the initial—exploitative—and unequal distribution of assets. The workers, as a class, have been exploited simply because they, as a class, have been given an unequal share of resources and assets. Unequal distribution is unjust because, in a

⁴³ Ibid. p.253-54.

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capitalist regime, unequal distribution is the same thing as condemning those with fewer resources to exploitative situations (be that in a capitalist labor market or a credit market).

Also, Roemer's critique of domination theory fits perfectly within the new conceptualization of exploitation-as-unequal-distribution. Because of this initial exploitative situation, workers are dominated in the sense that they lack free access to the means of production and resources. Thus, Roemer's notion of Domination I becomes even clearer under the new conception of exploitation, and, instead of refuting the justification of exploitation, it now greatly enhances it because the initial exploitative state of affairs is exactly what brings about the autocratic structure of the capitalist workplace. Under the new conception, Roemer's critique of Domination II now becomes a second-order critique. In fact, this critique is now somewhat superfluous in that, for the critique to properly function, exploitation had been presupposed to already be in place. Since Roemer's thought experiment demonstrates that exploitation arises in areas without any labor force, it only goes on to prove that exploitation must be construed as a more fundamental notion of unequal distribution.

In re-examining Roemer's critique of alienation theory, remember that Roemer tried to demonstrate through a hypothetical situation that differential alienation is a volitional act on the part of the worker. However, Roemer fails to account for the fact that the worker still only has options available to him/her within the capitalist system and that it is completely plausible that the worker would have access to better options outside of the capitalist system. So while the worker may still choose to alienate him/herself, he/she only does so within the initially exploitative capitalist situation. Thus, this critique gives weight to Cohen's notion of the worker's forced situation in that his/her only viable

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alternative is to sell his/her labor in order to survive in any capitalist regime. Again, this critique, along with the others, fails to reveal any lack of justification on the part of our interest in exploitation theory once exploitation has been understood in this new, Cohenian light. Once exploitation is understood as exploitation-as-unequal-distribution, Roemer's critiques, if anything, only add weight to our motivation for gaining a more thorough understanding of exploitation theory.

From this, I believe that we have obtained both a moral and a political justification for the notions of exploitation and collective unfreedom; namely, that initial exploitation gives rise to collective unfreedom that unduly forces workers into disparate situations where workers have no choice but to acquiesce to the subjugation of their class by capitalists. This subjugation of the working class is unjust because subjugation necessarily restricts freedom, and the unwarranted restriction of freedom is always unjust. So, a justification for our interest in exploitation theory should look something like this: during the initial process of the distribution of productive resources, a group of individuals were exploited in that this group unfairly received a less-than-equal amount of the initial productive resources. Because of the right to private property enforced by capitalists, the working class continues to suffer "restricted access"⁴⁴ and differential ownership in the means of production and is, therefore, forced to work in a capitalist-structured workplace in order to survive. Now, because this collectively exploitative situation continues, instances of individual exploitation of labor can now be witnessed.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Ibid. p.244-45.

⁴⁵ (i) The laborer is the only person who creates the product, that which has value.
 (ii) The capitalist receives some of the value of the product. Therefore:
 (iii) The laborer receives less value than the value of what he creates, and
 (iv) The capitalist receives some of the value of what the laborer creates. Therefore:
 (v) The laborer is exploited by the capitalist.

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Thus, to substantiate my first criterion: it is clear that because of the initial unequal distribution of resources, there is a class of individuals who are necessarily oppressed, manipulated, who lack certain freedoms that members of the other class possess, and most importantly, that the members of this class are exploited members and are treated solely as a means to an end. If this situation is not unjust then nothing is. I must now argue my second and third criteria: (2) that the workers are unjustly forced into this situation and have no capability to escape the exploitative situation, and; (3) that the injustice of the previously described situation is unavoidable. First, members of the working class have no other options but to enter into the capitalist-structured, exploitative situation. Second, because this is an objective, collective situation concerning the relationship between capitalists and workers, the individual worker is powerless to alter the state of affairs (differential ownership and distribution) that makes this situation continuously exploitative and unjust.⁴⁶ We see that this is so by carefully examining Cohen's notion of contingent freedom. Remember that for all individuals in the working class, each person's freedom is contingent upon the other. Thus, escape from the working class for all workers is an impossibility because for capitalism to function, there must be a working class.⁴⁷ Third, the presence of unequal distribution and differential ownership of productive assets within a capitalist society means that a working class must be collectively coerced into selling their labor-power because the collective

I think that this is the conception of exploitation that Roemer was most interested in.

⁴⁶ Ibid. p.254.

⁴⁷ This statement also addresses Roemer's critique involving differential ownership. In this critique he attempted to show that exploitation can arise in a capitalist regime where the rich are exploited by the poor. This critique fails when we examine the same scenario using the new conceptualization of exploitation; namely exploitation of the working class. Surely he would not still assert that the whole of the working class could possibly exploit the whole of the capitalist class. If this were so, then the roles would simply be reversed and the problem of exploitation would still persist.

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coercion of the working class is a necessary consequence of the structure of capitalism.⁴⁸

I think that if we agree with the premises, then my conclusion stands; namely, that the injustice of the situation of the working class is an unavoidable consequence of the exploitative capitalist society.

§

In closing, I would like to reiterate that the purpose of this examination of exploitation was to demonstrate that we can justify an interesting exploitation, as a critical theory, on both moral and political grounds. I began by discussing John Roemer's critical analysis of exploitation theory, whereby he found that exploitation—construed as a theory of the exploitation of individual labor—cannot be logically justified by appealing to areas where he assumed exploitation would most likely be justified: domination theory, accumulation theory, and alienation theory. However, Roemer also alluded to another possible justification of exploitation theory that he was unable to cover in his essay due to the scope of the argument involved. Thus I have attempted to lay out that argument in light of Roemer's essay in hopes that I could demonstrate, through the work of G.A. Cohen, that exploitation theory could in fact be justified in the manner that Roemer alluded to at the end of his essay. This demonstration involved a re-conceptualization of exploitation that more fully captures the moral motivations that brought the theory about in the first place.⁴⁹ This notion of exploitation theory—construed as the collective exploitation of the working class—provides a new conception of exploitation that encompasses all of the strengths of the previous

⁴⁸ Ibid. p.254.

⁴⁹ It can be argued that I have moved too far away from the traditional Marxian notion of exploitation, but I think that the new conceptualization given by Cohen captures the essence of what Marx meant when applying his exploitation theory as a critical theory.

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conception while removing all of its weaknesses. This new theory, provided in part by Roemer and in part by Cohen, conceptualizes exploitation theory as being concerned with the exploitative state of affairs involving the unequal distribution and ownership of productive assets and with the forced collective coercion of an entire class of individuals into an unjust, unfair labor situation. I truly believe that once exploitation theory is seen in this light, its justification can no longer be questioned. There is no doubt, however, that this conceptualization of exploitation theory also remains highly political.

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