

Original Paper

Research on Cohen's Marxist View of Equality

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Abstract

Cohen's Marxist view of equality is formed on the basis of criticizing liberals and classical Marxism. On the one hand, he opposes the equality thought of Rawls and Nozick, and on the other hand, he tries to establish a realistic and standardized Marxist view of equality. In addition, Cohen, while criticizing the arguments of the liberals, also constantly rethinks the classical Marxism on the concept of equality, and reconstructs the Marxist concept of equality to a certain extent. Dialectically speaking, although Cohen's view of equality differs from the Marxist view of equality, it still plays a vital role in the construction of an equal society and the development of equality thought.

Keywords

Cohen, Marxist, View of equality

1. Introduce

The concept of equality is an important category in the field of western political philosophy, and the interpretation of the concept of equality is also different. At the end of the 20th century, when the liberal capitalist movement was developing generally and the international communist movement suffered a major setback, with the liberals represented by Rawls defending capitalist inequality, many Marxists also began to reflect on the Marxist concept of equality, among which G.A., as an analysis of the founder of Marxism. Cohen is a typical example. Cohen creatively combined Marxism with analytical philosophy, viewed the traditional Marxist concept of equality from the perspective of realistic analysis, criticized the unequal nature of liberal capitalism with sharp theoretical weapons, criticized the irrationality of self-ownership principles, and proposed the internal relationship between freedom and equality. For more than 30 years, Cohen's research on equality has become a valuable stage for our dialogue with liberal capitalism, a theoretical trend that reflects the search for an ideal society of equality in the future, whose "fundamental goal is to criticize and replace the liberal theory of justice. (Will, 2004). How to view and understand the concept of "equality" is a realistic problem

that we must pay attention to at present when the debate on equality is still severe. Analyzing and understanding Cohen's Marxist view of equality has certain theoretical guiding significance for us to build an equal society and realize common prosperity.

2. Uphold the Marxist Concept of Equality in Criticism

Equality is the product of history, but in the course of history, the conflict between freedom and equality is always a real social problem. The same is true of capitalist society. In order to pursue the so-called "freedom", capitalism has to sacrifice "equality" at the cost, and with the continuous development of capitalist society, the gap between the rich and the poor becomes wider and wider. In this context, liberals have to defend "inequality", the representative figures of which are Rawls and Nozick. Cohen's Marxist view of equality was gradually formed in the process of rebutting the liberals represented by Rawls and Nozick, which made a strong defense for the maintenance of Marxist view of equality.

2.1 Oppose Rawls' Difference Principle

Cohen's criticism of Rawls is mainly reflected in *Saving Justice and Equality*, and *If You are an egalitarian, why are You So Rich?* In these works, the main problem is the equal liberalism based on the principle of difference proposed by Rawls. In the 1970s, Rawls published his book *A Theory of Justice*, in which Rawls extensively studied various theories of fairness and justice and designed a just economic system related to distributive justice. The core of this system is the principle of difference, that is, "social and economic inequalities should be arranged in such a way that they are consistent with the storage principle of justice". Appropriate to the best interests of the fewest beneficiaries; And subject to the opening of positions and offices to all under conditions of fair and equal opportunity (John, 2009). It can be seen that Rawls starts from the interests of the inferior, and when he considers from the perspective of the inferior in all aspects, inequality can reasonably exist. For the difference principle that only applies to the basic social structure but not to individual choice and individual behavior, people can choose freely within this structure, and the final score is bound to be fair and equal, because the interests of the inferior will be improved to the greatest extent. The principle of difference allows such unequal distribution "to the greatest benefit of the least benefitted," and is therefore also an incentive policy, an effort to make all members of society equal through redistribution (Zhao, 2013).

Cohen believes that Rawls' principle of justice is ostensibly to safeguard equality, but it is actually a secret defense of inequality under the surface of seeming equality. "A society that is equal according to the principle of difference requires mandatory rules, as well as a sense of justice that permeates individual choice (Cohen, 2009)." When the majority of people in a society agree with the principle of difference, they will not ask for higher remuneration due to higher productivity, because this selfish motive of pursuing the maximization of interests is not in line with the principle of difference and is unfair. If the majority rejects the principle of difference, then it is unfair to insist that they will not

create greater productivity without higher pay, which leads directly to the death of the minimum requirements of a decent life for the disadvantaged. In short, whether a society is fair or not depends on the degree of fairness among the members of the whole society, not on the independence of each other. Rawls's equal liberalism is essentially a defense of inequality, and his principle of justice is only a regulatory principle for social management. It cannot be a fundamental principle for evaluating social justice, nor can it guide us to build an equal society. Therefore, Cohen proposed the socialist principle of equality of opportunity, the equality of available benefits, in an attempt to correct the inequality caused by social reasons, and at the same time to eliminate the inequality caused by differences in talent, and eliminate all non-selective disadvantages, so that beyond Rawls' principle of justice, he only corrected the limitations of social disadvantages.

2.2 Opposition to Nozick's Principle of Self-Ownership

The concept of "self-ownership" first appeared in Locke's *Treatise on Government*, where Locke argued that "every man has a right of ownership over his own person, and no one else has such a right (John, 2004). The labor of his body and the work of his hands are, we may say, rightfully his." On this basis, Nozick put forward the principle of self-ownership, arguing that each person should have ownership of himself and his abilities, and that each person owns his own property, without a contract, and is not obligated to provide any services or goods to others. It can be seen that the principle of self-ownership is a defense of the rationality of private property and the rationality of inequality brought about by the existence of private property.

Cohen's criticism of Nozick's self-ownership principle is mainly reflected in his book *Self-ownership, Freedom and Equality*. In the book, he takes the self-ownership principle as the premise, refutes Nozick's defense of private ownership inequality with the self-ownership principle through three stages of demonstration, and reveals the internal relationship between freedom and equality. In the first stage, Cohen argues that the self-ownership principle does not necessarily lead to the legalization of private property and inequality. In this phase, Cohen primarily targeted Nozick's "Chamberlain argument" that "whatever emerges from a just state by a just step is itself just." Cohen believes that liberals only focus on the autonomy of individual rights, but ignore the uneven distribution of resources other than people's own, under this condition, the argument that the principle of self-ownership leads to inequality is obviously untenable. In the second and second stage, Cohen put forward the external world view of "everyone can get", and demonstrated the possibility of equality and all principles of self coexist. In Cohen's view, a world "accessible to all" means that "the outside world belongs to all, and everyone has a veto over the future use of the outside world (Cohen, 2008)." In other words, the principle of self-ownership also has the right to all material and natural resources other than human beings on the premise of protecting individuals' ownership of their own rights, which is everyone's equal possession of external natural resources. In this way, a balanced relationship can be established between the principles of equality and self-ownership. Finally, in the third stage, Cohen sharply questioned the rationality of all the principles of the self. In the conclusion of the second stage, Cohen found that in a

world “accessible to all,” the principle of self-ownership loses its existential value and has only a formal meaning, “the communality of the external world makes the self-ownership of its inhabitants a mere form.” They cannot use their self-ownership to exercise any substantial control over their lives, because whatever they want to do will be subject to the veto power of others.” In view of this contradiction, Cohen believes that the denial of self-ownership does not mean the approval of slavery, nor does it mean the denial of human autonomy, nor does it mean the denial of Kant’s ethical proposition that man is an end rather than a means. On the contrary, affirming self-ownership endangers people’s autonomy and does not fundamentally prevent the utilitarian use of others’ behavior. Thus, Cohen strongly countered the rational defense of inequality by Nozick and other liberals, and played a great role in promoting the development of socialist equality.

3. Reconstruct the Marxist Equality View in the Criticism

Cohen criticizes the arguments of the liberals, and at the same time, he constantly reflects on the classical Marxist view of equality. In his view, the reason why Marxism cannot withstand the attack of libertarianism represented by Nozick is that classical Marxism, in attacking liberal capitalism, affirms the principle of self-ownership to a certain extent, and therefore this attack is incomplete. In the process of analyzing the Marxist view of equality, Cohen not only formed his own view, but also reconstructed the Marxist view of equality to some extent.

3.1 The Realization of Equal Conditions

In Cohen’s opinion, the classical Marxist view of equality, which establishes equality in the perfect state of socialism and communism, is too idealized to be realized, so he proposes to seek practical equality. Marx’s equality is divided into two stages, one is the socialist “from each according to his ability, according to his work” and the other is the communist “from each according to his ability, according to his need.” Cohen believes that the equality of the former society is obviously only formal equality, and the actual result is de facto inequality, because the talents, abilities and natural conditions of the workers are ignored. Regarding the latter equality, Cohen argues that “it is precisely because Marx was unnecessarily pessimistic about the social consequences of failing to achieve infinite affluence that he was so optimistic about the possibilities of affluence.” Pessimism about social possibilities breeds optimism about material possibilities.” In other words, Marx’s ideal of an extremely rich material communist society is now extremely difficult to achieve, as the successor and developer of Marxism, can not only indulge in the fantasy of the kingdom of freedom, and escape the reality of today’s material scarcity and frequent environmental crises. If the ecological crisis is not properly addressed but continues to worsen, material resources will not be extremely abundant in the foreseeable future, but on the contrary will be very scarce, while the Marxist theory of communism is based on material abundance, which will create a paradox and the idea of equality will be shattered. On this basis, Cohen began to construct his concept of equality, trying to conceive a scheme of equality under the condition of material scarcity. According to Cohen, there may be such a state of society that, although it

does not reach the level of communism envisaged by Marx, it can achieve the coordination of the interests of all parties, thus consolidating the structure of society and promoting social progress. Therefore, Cohen continued to explore and study this view of equality.

3.2 Standardization of Equal Realization

The concept of normative equality is not only about the description of social facts, but more importantly about the normative requirements of social development. By analyzing the Marxist concept of equality, Cohen believes that the equal society envisaged by Marx is very difficult to realize, and any real Marxist should work tirelessly for the pursuit of equality, and cannot just hold the dream of a free and equal society for the liberation of all mankind in the future and escape the current equality problem. Therefore, Cohen tried to establish the norms of a realistic egalitarian society. In his view, Marx criticized capitalism for using distribution rights to cover up exploitation and inequality, and constructed a form of equality of “each according to his ability”, but this is actually unequal for real workers. As mentioned above, individuals vary greatly in their gifts, talents, and resources, and equality of form does not necessarily create equality of outcome. Cohen’s further analysis shows that the Marxist view of equality also partially affirms the principle of self-ownership that liberals talk about, especially in terms of the allocation of primary resources. Cohen pointed out that Marx opposed to attributing the unfair causes of exploitation to the unequal distribution of original resources, “For Marx, the injustice of the original distribution comes from the injustice of the exploitative flows they produce.” That is to say, the inequality of the original distribution is only the generative cause of injustice, not the main cause. However, in this argument, Marx has actually applied the principle of self-ownership, although Marx’s identification with freedom is only a strategic identification, and attempts to refute capitalism through the conceptual tool of self-ownership, but the result is to shake its own theory. Later, Nozick used the so-called “clean-born capitalism” and the principle of self-ownership to demonstrate the justice of capitalist ownership. Thus, from the principle of self-ownership, it is possible to reach both equal and unequal conclusions in Cohen’s argument. Finally, Cohen also accepted the principle of self-ownership to some extent, attempted to transform the principle of self-ownership with socialist thought, and put forward his idea of “the external world is shared by all”. In his vision, self-ownership is dispensable in a shared world, where everyone can achieve a high degree of freedom and equality.

4. A Dialectical Evaluation of Cohen’s Marxist View of Equality

According to the above analysis, we can see that Cohen has some unique views on the Marxist view of equality. His innovative thought theory maintains and develops the Marxist view of equality to a certain extent, but there are some cognitive deviations, so we need to dialectically treat and evaluate his Marxist view of equality.

4.1 Cohen Misunderstands the Marxist View of Equality

When Cohen refuted the liberal capitalists and reflected on the Marxist view of equality, although he stood on the Marxist stand, his thought was deviated from Marx's idea of equality, or Cohen's misunderstanding of Marx's view of equality. First, on the question of self-ownership, as mentioned above, Cohen believes that Marx, on the one hand, criticizes liberal capitalism, and on the other, applies the liberal capitalist concept of self-ownership, so such criticism is vague and incomplete. In fact, Marx clearly pointed out "two breaks", namely, "the communist revolution is the most complete break with traditional property relations, and not surprisingly, it is the most complete break with traditional ideas in the course of its development." In other words, Marx has emphasized the separation of values from capitalism. Moreover, Marx's recognition of ownership as the common possession of "united individuals" with the aim of the free development of each individual is clearly different from Nozick's "self-ownership." Therefore, Cohen's misunderstanding of Marx on this point also reflects his misunderstanding of communism. Secondly, Cohen misreads Marx's two empirical assertions about the prospect of equality. The first is that the rise of the organized working class will eventually wipe out the unequal society; Second, the development of productive forces and the enhancement of human capabilities will bring about a great abundance of material wealth, and inequality will also disappear. However, in Cohen's analytical conditions, class organization and ecological crisis have become insurmountable obstacles, so they lose confidence in the future and attempt to establish the desired equality in modern society, which is contrary to Marx's view.

4.2 Cohen's Marxist View of Equality Is of Great Significance

Although Cohen's Marxist view of equality differs from classical Marxism in many aspects, his original idea still has important theoretical value and practical significance. On the theoretical level, Cohen, as the founder of analytical Marxism, the equality theory he put forward has far-reaching significance to the development of Marxism. On the one hand, he launched a powerful counterattack against the anti-socialist Western political philosophy, fundamentally negating the capitalist system and maintaining the order of Marxist political philosophy. His active defense of socialist egalitarianism has profoundly clarified the legitimacy and rationality of socialism, and powerfully countered the western liberalism's attack on socialist freedom and democracy. At the same time, Cohen turned from the early defense of Marx's historical materialism to the study of equality, expanded the new horizon of Marxist analysis, opened up a new field of Marxist equality thought, and deepened the study of Western Marxist equality theory. On the practical level, Cohen's Marxist view of equality has certain reference significance for understanding and solving the equality problem in China. Cohen constructed an ideal blueprint of socialist equality to realize social equality, and conceived a social community under which all members of society have a certain sense of justice, everyone can choose voluntarily, and members of society have a certain sense of caring for each other. Many of the practical dilemmas he put forward also reveal that the construction of socialism is not accomplished overnight, it requires not only the continuous improvement of the fair distribution system by the state, but also the active participation

and role of the broad masses of the people in the construction of socialist equality.

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