

Marxist Claim (MC): Under capitalism, workers are forced to sell their labor.

What does this mean?

- (1) To be forced to do something = having no reasonable or acceptable alternative
- (2) To be forced to do something requires human agency as the source of the force.

Notes on (2):

Acceptable to Cohen, although he doesn't think it's generally true.

Cohen claim: "If relations of production force people to do things, people force people to do things."

Thus accepting (2) still allows the claim that workers are forced to sell labor under capitalism.

- Why?
- Relations of production = standard economic powers that certain people possess under capitalism
 - The structure of capitalism is based on these powers and they are what force workers to sell their labor.
 - Capitalism requires the actions of a lot of people to sustain it (especially actions by the State). Enough human will is behind these actions to satisfy criterion (2).

Examples:

- Factory owner who forces workers to work at gun-point. Workers are not forced to work due to structure of capitalism.
- Worker who's forced to work to survive (provide food, rent, etc) is forced to work by the structure of capitalism.

General Objection to MC: Workers are not forced to sell their labor because they have a reasonable and acceptable alternative: *they can escape the working class by becoming small business owners ("petty bourgeoisie").*

Two "Left-Wing" Responses:

- (1) Only shows workers are not forced to remain workers. Doesn't show that, *while they were workers*, they were not forced to sell their labor.

Cohen Counter-response:

Misses intent of MC: At any given time, workers are forced to continue to sell their labor over some finite future time period.

Example:

If you're forced on Tuesday to sell your labor on Tuesday, but not forced on Tuesday to sell your labor on Wednesday, then you're not forced to sell your labor in the sense of MC.

So: If some workers do escape working class, then they are not forced to sell labor in sense of MC.

- (2) Some workers can escape, but *capitalism only allows a small number of escape routes* (otherwise no workers to support it). And if only a small fraction of workers can escape, then workers as a whole are still forced to sell their labor.

Cohen Counter-response:

Individually, workers are free to escape; *collectively*, they are not.

Room Analogy:

- 10 people in room locked in by jailer.
- One door, one key.
- Door only allows one person to use key to exit.

Consequence: Whatever happens, at least 9 people will remain imprisoned.

Claim: Any individual person is free to leave (not forced by jailer to remain).
But *collectively*, *all are unfree* (all are forced by jailer to remain).

Collective unfreedom of people in room: freedom of each individual is *contingent* on the others not to exercise *theirs*.

Apply to working class:

Workers are individually free to escape working class, but collectively unfree to do so.

OR

Workers are individually not forced to sell their labor, but collectively are forced to sell their labor.

working class = "imprisoned class"

Note1: Capitalist exploitation doesn't require unfreedom of specific individuals - anonymous exploitation.

Note2: Room analogy argument requires that not every exit from working class is crowded with would-be escapees. Why this is so:

- (a) Escape is hard.
- (b) Class inertia: people brought up as workers may psychologically find it hard to be anything but workers.
- (c) Workers may not want to escape (to become capitalists): may not want to impose hardships they've experienced on others.

Cohen's Main Claims (restated):

- I. There are more exits from working class than there are workers trying to leave it.
Thus workers are individually free to leave working class.
- II. There are very few exits from working class and there are very many workers in it.
Thus workers are collectively unfree to leave working class.

Note1: I and II are intended as specific claims for British workers.

Note2: "Right-wingers" will applaud I and object to II.
"Left-wingers" will object to I and applaud II.

Four "Right-Wing" Objections to II:

(R1) Workers are not *collectively unfree* to leave working class, but rather *collectively unable*.

Claim: The few exits from the working class are *not due to human actions*, so workers cannot be said to be *forced* to remain in working class.

Example: Turn room into cave with no jailer. Suppose there's a small hole that only allows one miner to escape). Then miners are not being *forced* by a human agent to remain in cave; they are not collectively unfree to escape. Same with working class.

Cohen responses:

- (a) Cave is counterexample to thesis that force requires human enforcer - it's intuitively clear that miners are forced to remain.
- (b) Alternatively, any miner can be said to be forced to remain by any of the others: that one who succeeds in escaping enforces imprisonment of those remaining.
- (c) Moreover, economic structure of capitalism *is* due to human agency; so workers (if not trapped miners) *can* be said to be forced by other humans to remain workers.
- (d) Even if workers are not considered forced but merely unable to escape, shouldn't this be of moral concern?

(R2) *Collective unfreedom occurs only in cases in which individuals are free*. So what's so bad about it? (*i.e.*, isn't individual freedom the key concept?)

Example: Among qualified applicants, there's a good deal of individual freedom to apply to Harvard (freshmen quota always needs filled). But very large amount of collective unfreedom to apply to Harvard (once quota is reached, no more can get in). But so what?

Note:

Collective unfreedom
unfreedom of individuals
as members of a group

IS NOT

Group unfreedom
unfreedom of group
as a whole

So: Just because working class *as a group* may be free to overthrow capitalism, doesn't mean working class is collectively free to do this. (Because any individual worker is *not* free to do this.)

Cohen responses:

- (a) First, collective unfreedom *is* concerned with individual freedom: *Collective unfreedom generates individual unfreedoms* (as soon as enough people exercise their intertwined individual freedoms).
- (b) Moreover, whether collective unfreedom with respect to an action is good or bad *depends on the nature of the action*.

So: Collective unfreedom with respect to escaping working class is bad, not merely because it is a collective unfreedom. But because of its nature - under it, workers are forced to subordinate themselves, sell their labor to survive, *etc.*

Harvard example: If you're a qualified applicant who doesn't make the quota, there's always Princeton, Yale, Polytechnic, *etc.*

(R3) *Capitalists are in similar boat*: Workers are collectively unfree to leave working class, but capitalists are collectively unfree to leave capitalist class.

i.e., workers are collectively unfree to become buyers of labor (*viz.*, capitalists), and capitalists are collectively unfree to become sellers of labor (*viz.*, workers)

Cohen responses:

Workers are more unfree to change their situation than capitalists.

- (a) More worker slots for capitalists than *vis versa*.
- (b) Most workers would be willing to trade their situations with capitalists and not *vis versa*.
- (c) Capitalists can even change their situations *without* worker slots being available: just give away their wealth!

(R4) *Workers have additional avenues of escape than becoming capitalists*: They can form *cooperatives*. So they are *not* collectively unfree to escape, even if becoming capitalists is not a viable alternative.

Recall Nozick: Such opportunities do exist. If workers remain stuck in working class, no fault of capitalism (blame lazy workers).

Cohen response:

Claim I says: *Individual* escape is possible.

Claim II says: *Mass* escape is not possible.

Capitalism allows possibility of workers' coops. But, does little to encourage them:

- require external finance (few investors willing to take risk)
- considered as threats by individual capitalists

So: Unrealistic to think coops provide a means of mass escape.

Two "Left-Wing" Objections to I:

(L1) Workers lack requisite skills to individually escape working class.

i.e., commercial shrewdness, communication skills, personal traits, *etc.*

Cohen response:

Make distinction between *the freedom to do something* and *the capacity to do it*.

Examples:

World's best swimmer in jail: Has capacity to swim English Channel but not freedom to do it.

G. A. Cohen: Does not have capacity to swim English Channel but does have freedom to do it.

Claim: Just because worker may lack the capacity to escape doesn't mean worker lacks freedom to escape.

However: If one lacks capacity to do something, *and this is due to actions of others*, then one lacks freedom to do it.

Example: *Suppose prisoners in Room Analogy are purposely starved by jailer so that none has strength to lift key. Then they are individually unfree to leave.*

So: (L1) is effective against Claim I if it can be shown that capitalism makes workers incapable of being anything else than workers.

(L2) Workers are not individually free to leave working class because *escape path is not an acceptable alternative to remaining a worker*: attempting to become a petty bourgeoisie is too risky.

Claim: Attempting to become a capitalist is too risky to be an acceptable option for worker:

- *chance of failure is too great*
- *costs of failure are too high* (failure leaves worker in worse state than if he had not made attempt)

Note: Explains why immigrant workers make more attempts than "native" workers (and consequently are more successful): Initial state for immigrants is far worse than for natives (prejudice, language, etc).

Cohen response:

Ultimately, argument rests on subjective notion of how acceptable a risk is.

E.g., for immigrant workers, potential pay-off may outweigh risk; for native workers, pay-off may not out-weigh risk.