

## G. A. COHEN: MARX AND LOCKE ON LAND AND LABOUR

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The aim of this work is to review how Gerald A. Cohen gets to grips with Marx and Locke on land and labour in his book *Self-ownership, Freedom and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). In chapter 7, Cohen analyzes a couple of arguments in John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, which threaten to undermine the hope that some support for equality of condition might come from an egalitarianism of worldly resources. Cohen's interest in partial egalitarianism moves him to avert the threat of Locke's arguments. But before we turn to Locke, some words about egalitarianism:

The axial distinction between self-ownership and world-ownership generates three views about the powers of nature and the powers of people. The views differ according as they do or do not encourage an egalitarian approach to the substances and capacities of nature on the one hand, and to the powers of people to modify nature on the other (p. 165).

First, the libertarian approach affirms the principle of self-ownership. This principle postulates, "that every person is morally entitled to [universal] full private property in his own person and powers" (pp.116-117). This means that each person has a set of rights over the use and fruits of his body and capacities, as he is entitled to the unrestricted private ownership of a piece of physical property. One aspect of the self-ownership principle—by analogy with the right in physical property not to be forced (in a non-contractual sense) to place what you own at the disposal of anyone else—is that a person does not own himself fully, if he is restrained by force, and without him having contracted to do so, to lend his assistance to anyone else, or to transfer (part of) what he produces to anyone else, either directly or through state-imposed redistribution.

Second, the egalitarian approach, by contrast, restricts the self-ownership principle. That approach claims that, because it is a matter of brute luck that a person has the talents and capacities he does, those talents and capacities do not, morally speaking, unambiguously belong to him: "they are resources over the fruits of whose exercise the community as a whole may legitimately dispose" (p. 118). Thus the egalitarian rationale is that the self-owning person should share not

only what nature produces but also the product of his natural powers according to a difference principle.

And third, there is an intermediate attempt to conjoin the principle of self-ownership with an egalitarian regime over the resources of nature only. Cohen calls this approach *partial egalitarianism*, and it is his main concern—in all the breath and depth of his book: “how far one can go, in the direction of some sort of final equality of condition, on the basis of egalitarianism of external resources which concedes each person’s sovereignty over herself” (p. 166).

Now turning to our topic, Locke claims that labour is responsible for virtually all of the value of what human beings want or need, while natural resources are responsible for virtually none of it: “the intrinsic value of things... depends only on their usefulness to the life of man” [1]. For Cohen, when Locke makes this claim, the word ‘value’ concerns ‘use-value’, as we will see below.

Other forms, for instance, of Locke’s claim are:

Labour makes the far greatest part of the value of things we enjoy in this world. And the ground which produces the materials is scarce to be reckoned in as any, or at most but a very small part of it...[2].

‘Tis labour, then, which puts the greatest part of value upon land, without which it would scarcely be worth anything... Nature and the earth furnished only the most worthless materials, as in themselves [3].

If uncultivated land creates virtually no value, Locke infers therefore it possesses virtually no value. He repeatedly emphasizes the claim that labour creates almost all of value of things and that natural resources have almost no value. Cohen draws two conclusions that might be thought to follow from Locke’s claim, and he shall focus “on his premiss that labour creates virtually all value, and what plainly was his argument for it, rather on what, not equally plainly, his inference from it was” (p. 176).

The first conclusion, writes Cohen, which Locke has been thought to draw from the premiss that labour creates virtually all of the value of things is “that no one should object very

strongly to currently existing inequality, since it largely descends from people's exercise of their self-owned powers and subsequent disposal of what they created by using them" (*Loc. cit.*).

The second conclusion is that "the original formation of private property in unowned external things was justified by the fact that those things were nearly valueless before their labouring appropriators envalued them" (*Ibidem*).

Cohen states that we find in Locke a pair of arguments with a 'common premiss':

(p) "Labour is responsible for virtually all the value of what we use and consume".

The conclusion of the first argument, which Cohen calls 'the value/appropriation argument' is:

(1) "A person who labours on unowned natural resources becomes...their legitimate owner".

And the conclusion of the argument here called 'the value/inequality argument' is:

(2) "Inequality in distribution is justified, since...it reflects unequal value-creating applications of labour".

At this point Cohen explains that the common premiss should not be identified with another Lockean claim, to wit, the 'labour mixture argument'. It states that when one labours on something, one mixes one's labour with it, thereby placing within it something one owns.

Every man has a property in his own person.... The labour of his body, and the work of his hands... are properly his. Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided... he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property [4].

Locke uses this claim as premiss to justify the original formation of private property out of what nobody privately owns, 'the common [that] is of no use'.

Cohen distinguishes the labour mixture argument from the value/appropriation argument, whose conclusion it shares. Although many are inclined to confuse them, since it is by labouring on something that you enhance its value, and perhaps your action on it should count as labour only if it does enhance its value. Cohen argues, in the logic of the labour mixture argument, that:

It is labour itself, and not value-creation, which justifies the claim to private property. If you own what you laboured on because your own labour is in it, then you do not own it because you have enhanced its value (p. 177).

And with regard to the value/appropriation argument: “it is the conferring of value as such, not the labour by which it is conferred, that is essential” (*Loc. cit.*).

For Cohen, Locke’s principal labour mixture statements (paras. 27-34) do not invoke the consideration that labour enhances the value of that to which it is applied, but what is ‘added’ to nature is labour, not value. Nevertheless, Cohen writes that Locke, in later statements (paras. 40-3), brings value enhancement to the fore, where he is not trying to defend the initial appropriation of private property, but advancing the differently concluding value/inequality argument, that is, the property of labour should be able to outweigh the community of land.

For ‘tis labour indeed that puts the difference of value on everything; and let anyone considerer, what the difference is between an acre of land planted... and an acre of the same land lying in common, without any husbandry upon it, and he will find, that the improvement of labour makes the far greater part of value [5].

In other words, his intention is to justify that almost all of present inequality is due not to any unequal initial appropriation but to the labour which followed after the initial appropriation.

Cohen writes that is misleading to describe Locke’s premiss as a rough statement of what, from Marx, has been known as the labour theory of value, since the value Locke says is due to labour, use-value, is not the value Marx says labour created, exchange-value. Let us deal briefly with the distinction between *exchange-value* and *use-value*:

[Exchange-value] is the power of a thing to exchange against other things on the market, the measure of its power to do so being given by the number of things of any other kind for which it will exchange And... use-value... is the power of a thing to satisfy human desire, whether directly or indirectly. A thing satisfies desire indirectly when... is used to produce another thing which satisfies desire directly, in the sense that, to satisfy desire, that other thing need only be consumed (p. 171).

If we read Locke, writes Cohen, with this distinction in mind, we will agree that his labour premiss praises labour as the source of use-value, not exchange-value:

The provisions serving to the support of human life produced by one acre of enclosed and cultivated land are... ten times more than those which are yielded by an acre of land of an equal richness lying waste in common [6].

The increase of land's value is here assigned to the action of labour, and is an increase in its use-value. Here Cohen points out how "Locke's figures have to do with the comparative physical yields, or use-values, which virgin and cultivated land produce, not with what virgin and cultivated land would respectively fetch on the market" (p. 179).

In other words, Locke's use-value *explanandum* has a different rationale from Marxian exchange-value *explanandum*. In Locke's labour premiss the *explanans* is 'concrete labour', that is, labour considered in its concrete forms, while in Marx's labour theory "the exchange-value of a commodity varies directly and uniformly with the amount of labour time required to produce commodities of its kind under currently standard conditions of production...It is the amount of labour time that would...be required to produce things...which accounts for how much exchange-value things have"(p. 173). Here is a simple proof that Locke's explanans of value is not the amount of labour time required to produce the product:

'Tis not barely the ploughman's pains, the reaper's and thresher's toil and the baker's sweat, is to be counted into the bread we eat; the labour of those who broke the oxen, who dug and wrought the iron and stones, who felled and framed the timber employed about the plough, mill, oven, or any other utensils, which are a vast number, requisite to the corn, from its being seed to be sown to its being made bread, must all be charged on the account of labour, and received as an effect of that. Nature and the earth furnished only the almost worthless materials as in themselves [7].

The labour described above is not measured by a Marxian criterion. Locke's point is rather that a great deal of variously concrete labour is needed to get consumable goods from a land 'scarcely...worth anything'. And it is not clear how Locke's labour catalogue is supposed to serve his own purpose, which is to affirm that labour is the source of almost all use-value.

Cohen's main criticism of Locke's value arguments is "an objection to the basis on which he asserts their premiss, which is the premiss that labour is responsible for almost all of what the land yields" (p. 182). Locke establishes that premiss on the basis of what Cohen calls the 'subtraction criterion'. In Cohen's view, Locke determines the contribution of labour to use-value by comparing the yield of the land with an and without labour [8]: "you subtract what the

land yields without labour from what it yields with it, and then you form the fraction got by putting the result of that subtraction over what the land yields with labour. The resulting fraction...is supposed to indicate the proportion of use-value which is due to labour, with the rest, consequently, being due to land” (p. 179):

$$\frac{\text{Amount land yields with labour minus amount it yields without it}}{\text{Amount land yields with labour}}$$

Cohen argues that the labour premiss is not true on the basis of Locke’s subtraction criterion due to its unacceptable consequences and its intrinsic logical contradiction. He illustrates, in a contrastive sense, the unacceptable consequences of the subtraction criterion as follows: “suppose that just one hour of digging creates a well which yields a thousand gallon of water a year, where before there was only a measly annual ten-gallon trickle. It would surely be wrong to infer, from the fact that the digging *raised* the water yield from ten to a thousand gallons, that the digging is responsible for 99 per cent of the water yielded by, and, hence, of the use-value produced by, the dug land, while the land itself is responsible for only 1 per cent of it” (p. 182). Must we therefore say that the land which, spontaneously trickles water, makes some small contribution to the use-value of water?

Cohen exposes Locke’s fallacy in these terms: “Locke’s criterion fails because the *difference* application of a factor makes to output, its marginal contribution, cannot be treated as its contribution to that output *by contrast* with the contribution of other factors” (p. 183). In other words, it will be true that:

(1) The application of labour makes virgin land produce ten times what it did before.

But it does not follow that:

(2) Labour produces 90 per cent of the product of applying it to virgin land.

Thus Cohen’s conclusions are that (1) and (2) cannot be confused; (2) cannot be inferred from (1); and (1) serves no labour praising and land-diminishing when (2) is neither confused with it nor derived from it.

But Cohen continues arguing that Locke's criterion leads to a contradiction too. He illustrates the fallacy making the following example: "if a piece of land is cropless without labour, but yields a crop with it, then *labour is responsible for all of that crop* (1), and *land is responsible for none of it* (2). But, although the *land is entirely cropless without labour* (3), it is equally true that the *labour... would yield no crop* on infertile land (4)" (p. 184).

The example entails a manifest contradiction: If (1) and (3) are somehow consistent with each other, (1) and (4) are certainly not. If labour is responsible for all of the crop, then we cannot infer --on the Lockean ground that none of the crop comes without labour--, that labour, as opposed to the land, is responsible for all of that crop. The conclusion is impossible because labour also is responsible for none of the crop, since labour on infertile land produces no crop: labour cannot be both responsible for the entire crop and responsible for none of it. To conclude, Locke provides *inadequate* grounds for his premiss.

On the other hand, Cohen claims that Locke's premiss is *indefensible* for two reasons: a) He does not see any supplementary grounds to justify it is true; and b) if the statement 'land in general has nearly no use-value' is true, Cohen undermines it drawing the following case: suppose some land that yields nothing without labour, though yields very much with it. One could not say that 'such land has virtually no use-value' --on Locke's criterion--, because precisely 'that particular land yields so much with labour'. "Its use-value cannot be considered trivial, since it has a prodigious power to satisfy desire, in virtue of how it reacts when labour is applied to it" (p. 186).

But even if Locke's labour premiss were true, it would not sustain the conclusions that are drawn from it, namely, that original appropriation and/or currently existing inequality are justified. Cohen claims that if we assumed Locke's position that even if land never produced anything without labour, and labour was responsible for all the use-value drawn from land, the landowner would not thereby be justified in taking all of the land's fruit. "For that inference ignores the consideration that not everyone might have had an equivalent opportunity to labour on land, because there was no land left to labour on, or because the land left to labour on was less good than what the more fortunate laboured on" (p. 186).

Locke advances his argument for private property as the power of labour to create ownership of land in the following terms:

Who appropriated land to himself by his labour does not lessen but increase the common stock of mankind... he that encloses land, and has a greater plenty of the conveniences of life from ten acres than he could have had from a hundred left to nature, may truly be said to give ninety acres to mankind: for his labour now supplies him with provisions out of ten acres, which were but the product of a hundred lying in common [9].

In conclusion, Cohen holds that the argument fails for two reasons: first, ‘to give ninety acres to mankind’ has not in fact been left for other men; and second, Locke’s argument “justifies private property only as long as appropriation generates an expanding common for the privately unendowed to forage on, and it therefore fails to justify actual private property in the real and fully appropriated world” (p. 188).

### Footnotes

1. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, paragraph 37.
2. *Ibidem*, para. 42.
3. *Ibidem*, para. 43.
4. *Ibidem*, para. 27.
5. *Ibidem*, para. 40.
6. *Ibidem*, para. 37.
7. *Ibidem*, para. 43.
8. *Cf. supra* para. 37.
9. *Loc. cit.*

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