

Interview with John Roemer

In a recent article on this newspaper (il manifesto, 7th of November 2017), Luciana Castellina has asked what is currently the most pressing question for socialists and the Left today: exactly one hundred years after the Soviet Revolution, what are our main tasks and priorities? Her answer: “This is our problem: how to design a different world.”

The design of a different world has been at the core of John Roemer’s research for the last four decades. Economist, political philosopher and political scientist, Roemer has been a leading figure of the Left in American academia for the past four decades. He has been one of the founders of Analytical Marxism – one of the main Marxist schools in the Anglo-Saxon world, – and has written some seminal contributions on Marxian economic theory (especially on the theory of exploitation and class). In 1994, right after the collapse of the Berlin wall, he swam decidedly upstream and with an impressive intellectual tour de force reconsidered the very concept of socialism and provided a detailed blueprint for market socialism as a viable way of organising society in alternative to free market capitalism.

According to Roemer, socialism is not defined by the public ownership of the means of production: it is defined by the characteristics of society – the principles that prevail and the type of allocation of economic goods (wealth, income, labour, well-being) that is generated. Roughly speaking, a socialist society allows for the self-realisation of individuals, promotes community, and ensures that economic goods are allocated broadly in line with the modern theory of equality of opportunity. In this definition, Marxist theory meets the liberal egalitarian thought of philosophers such as John Rawls.

A definition of socialism in terms of the principles of distributive justice that should prevail in it has relevant theoretical and political implications. The construction of a command economy in the Soviet Union has represented one attempt to implement a socialist allocation, which history has proved to be tragically unsuccessful. Yet, the collapse of the command economies of the Eastern bloc does not mean the death of the socialist ideal, and it should not prevent us from searching for alternatives to the current economic order. Questions about the ownership of productive assets, the role of markets, the structure of taxation and redistribution – in short, about the implementation of socialism, – are still open.

Of course, any questions about the institutional mechanisms to organise a socialist society are strictly linked to the analysis of human behaviour. Are human beings inherently selfish and incapable of undertaking any collective efforts? In his last book (*How we do and could cooperate: A Kantian explanation*, forthcoming with Yale University Press) Roemer develops a novel approach to cooperative behaviour grounded in Kantian theory with substantive implications for the problem of socialist design. On the 18th of December, Roemer will discuss his theory of Kantian behaviour in a conference at Queen Mary University of London – co-organised by the Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences and the *Review of Social Economy*. I take this opportunity to interview him.

Your research has touched upon a wide variety of topics. Two threads, however, seem to recur. The first concerns the shape of an ideal society: the definition of the principles of distributive justice that should guide the allocation of economic goods (income, wealth, labour) in a fair

society. Can you explain your approach to the theory of equality of opportunity? And how do advanced capitalist societies fare according to the equal opportunity metric?

The approach to equality of opportunity that I advocate flows from the fertile discussion in Anglo-American political philosophy about egalitarianism that started with John Rawls around 1960, and subsequently produced important interventions by Ronald Dworkin and G.A. Cohen. The kind of egalitarianism that these writers advocate differs in detail: I'll take the latest version, put forth by Cohen. The aim of egalitarian social policy should be to compensate individuals for bad luck, but allow their incomes to differ by virtue of different choices, exercised once the effects of bad luck have been repaired.

Perhaps the major form of bad luck is being born to parents who are poor or poorly educated. Children born into poor families have dramatically worse chances of succeeding than children born into more highly resourced families. So a major equal-opportunity policy is to inject more resources into disadvantaged children, through the school system, to elevate their ability to compete with children who receive those resources at home. Indeed, any policy that increases the resources that poor families receive will be to the advantage of the children, through providing more security to the family, and so on.

Think of a person's income as an adult as being determined by two kinds of influence: circumstances beyond his control (such as the family into which he/she is born) and 'effort,' meaning the choices the individual makes – how hard she works, what occupation she chooses, and so on. One of the subtle points is that effort and choice are themselves influenced by circumstances, and the theory must take that into account. Equality of opportunity for income will have been achieved in a society when it is the case that the distribution of income, for all groups defined by their circumstances, is approximately the same. If this were so, the chances that a person has for acquiring income would be the same, regardless of the circumstances that characterize his condition. The only countries on the planet in which this approximately true today are the Nordic countries.

Equality of opportunity does not mean equality of incomes. But the inequality of income that exists should be due to choices people have made – such as occupational choice – from a starting position where disadvantageous circumstances have been compensated for, in large part through education, but also other social programs (such as, for example, the Bolsa Familia in Brazil).

What is your view of socialism, and what is the relation between equality of opportunity and the socialist ideal?

A: Socialism is classically defined, at least since Marx, as a regime in which the large firms in the economy are owned collectively – by the state. The income from these firms, which would comprise a large part of the capital income of the country, would redound to the State Treasury. If the country is a democracy, that income would be used as the polity would choose to use it – for distribution to families, expenditure on public goods, financing education, healthcare and culture.

I believe, however, it is more clarifying to define socialism by its goals. After the fertile debate on egalitarianism that I referred to above, from Rawls to Cohen, I think it is best to say that a socialist

society has two main features: (1) the radical equalization of opportunities for income, and (2) the presence of a cooperative ethos, in which citizens desire and do cooperate with others in their economic pursuits. Let me say something more about these two features. The adjective 'radical' is meant to convey that not only should disadvantageous socio-economic circumstances of individuals be compensated, as I said above, but also *natural* disadvantages that some suffer from. For such disadvantage is also a matter of luck, and the basic principle of distributive justice that I've referred to is that it is unjust for some to suffer by virtue of bad luck over which they had no control. A cooperative ethos contrasts with the individualist ethos that characterizes the ideal 'economic agent' in a capitalist society. The individualist takes those actions that will maximize his economic payoff, given what others are doing; the co-operator views himself as 'in the same boat' with many others, and takes those actions which, if taken by all, would advance the condition of all. This may seem a bit vague, but it can be given a precise formulation as a protocol for economic behaviour. In our present-day capitalist societies, there are many people who behave this way: they enter occupations that will help others, and try to lead their lives in a way that, if all followed their example, would lead to good social outcomes. A person ruled by individualist ethos, in contrast, would take an income-maximizing action even if it harmed others. Intelligent, well-trained young people who go to work in the financial sector are ruled by this ethos, for they have chosen to use their talents to help rich people get richer. That is the main goal of finance in present-day capitalism, which is far from what its goal should be.

The second issue that recurs in your contributions is the problem of implementation of the ideal society. As philosopher Jerry Cohen put it, "the principal problem that faces the socialist ideal is that we do not know how to design the machinery that would make it run. Our problem is not, primarily, human selfishness, but our lack of a suitable organizational technology". This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Soviet Revolution and in the public perception, its legacy is just rubble. The conventional wisdom is that, desirable or not, a different society – socialism – is impossible. You have developed a thorough, detailed institutional blueprint for a socialist society. What is market socialism?

I have laid out above the two principles that I believe should guide the construction of a socialist economy. The means by which these principles can be achieved are many: indeed, we probably don't have much of an inkling about the variety of possible strategies because experimentation has barely begun. The big socialist experiments of the 20th century had two major characteristics: they shunned markets, and they were politically authoritarian. This is not the place to discuss why socialist experiments took this form. But it is surely premature to declare the death of socialism because the 20th century model failed.

I believe that any complex economy must use markets. The delicate question is how inequality of opportunity can be implemented while using markets. I believe that this can be done, and the trick is to combine markets with the cooperative ethos of workers, mentioned above. The poisonous combination is markets plus individualist ethos; markets in a society where the ethos is cooperative can bring about not only economic efficiency, but also income equality, of the kind I described as comprising equal opportunity.

The mistake market socialists have made, up until now, has been to conceptualize socialism as consisting *only* of state ownership of large firms. I believe that that kind of property relation may be a *part* of socialism, but it's not the main part. That main part is the cooperative ethos, which would regulate the actions of millions of citizens in their economic behaviour.

The reader might be sceptical. But I urge her to contemplate the fact that there are many people today in our societies who behave cooperatively. Capitalism, however, does not champion these people: it champions those who have become successful capitalists, or other high flyers who have excelled in the competitive economic game -- highly paid actors, athletes, professionals, not to speak to capitalist billionaires. So we may tend to forget the many people who choose not to maximize their wealth, but to pursue occupations that will help other individuals or society.

The current leadership of the Communist Party of China claim that their policies are aimed at creating a market socialist economy. Are they building an ideal society, or at least a genuinely different alternative economic system then?

China has accomplished an economic miracle: it has raised hundreds of millions of people out of poverty in a very short period. At the same time the income and wealth distributions have become very unequal in China, although not as unequal as these distributions are in the United States at present. What is the direction of China? I am cautious in making predictions, because China is so unique. It is the only country which moved from 20th century non-market 'socialism' to a successful market economy, which raised the living standards of the vast majority of people by huge amounts. Despite my caution, I am pessimistic that China will move towards real socialism, because I believe the cooperative ethos has largely disappeared. Many people, who believed in socialism and had a cooperative ethos, became seriously disillusioned about 'socialism' as a result of the Cultural Revolution, which destroyed many lives. At this point, I do not see where socialist ideas will come from in China. It is hard to conceive of the present leadership, many of whom are mega-millionaires or billionaires, providing an example that could give people faith in socialism. For above all, socialism means economic equality and cooperation, and the leadership of a socialist society must exemplify these goals.

You have argued that "Having a *design* for how socialism could work, *given* a willing population, is of primary importance in rekindling the socialist vision." Can you expand on this?

The design of Soviet-style socialism was central planning in place of markets, and dictatorship by the Communist Party in place of democracy. That didn't work. People will not fight for socialism until a new design can promise something much better. Even though Marx and Engels did not propose much in the way of a design for socialist society, their intellectual work inspired millions to organize for the overthrow of capitalism, for they provided a theory explaining why capitalism was not the end of history, and that socialism was next on the agenda. I don't think socialist economies will come about through violent revolution in the future, because I think they must emerge through democratic means. But for citizens in a capitalist democracy to demand a socialist transformation of economic institutions will probably require major catastrophes – financial crises or major depressions. We've seen how the 2008 financial crisis elicited both a left-wing and right-wing

response internationally. The speed at which the extreme right-wing, fascist response has grown is shocking to many on the Left – countries including India, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, the United States and the Philippines are currently led by fascist or nativist individuals, who have in the main not yet succeeded in transforming their institutions into fascist ones, and other countries – Germany, the UK, France – have strong extremist right-wing movements. Although there has been support also for left-wing politicians in some countries (Sanders in the US, Corbin in the UK, Syriza in Greece), it is doubtful that the Left will grow to become a major force without a new design for socialism.

Traditionally, the main role of unions has been considered to be linked to the solution of the collective action problem: unions are necessary to avoid free riding by promoting coordination and spreading of information. Other aspects of union activity have received less attention. The most famous union anthem in the USA, for example, says: “Solidarity forever, for the union makes us strong”. Would it be correct to say that one of the fundamental roles of unions has historically been the promotion of a solidaristic, cooperative culture in the working class, and to counter individualistic tendencies both in the solution of collective action problem and beyond?

I believe that the organization of unions in 20th century capitalist countries was of massive importance in bringing about the considerable redistribution of income that now characterizes most advanced capitalist countries, via the welfare state. The unions educated workers to have a cooperative, solidaristic ethos, and these workers were important in the growth of socialist, labor, and social-democratic parties in almost all European countries. There were also two catastrophes in the 20th century that I believed contributed to the growth of left-wing ideology: the Depression and the Second World War. In all the elections that took place in European democracies in 1945-6, the Left won approximately half the vote. Now I don't think world war *per se* moves people towards socialism – but the Second World War was an anti-fascist war, and that was key. In contrast, the First World War was an inter-imperialist war, and did not have the same effect on the political consciousness of the people. The growth of the welfare state after the Second World War was due, I believe, both to the admiration western citizens had for the Soviet Union, due to their critical role in defeating Hitler, and to the growth of unions.

Does this mean the next chapter in socialist experimentation will require as a pre-requisite rebuilding the union movement in capitalist countries, or another anti-fascist war? I doubt that's the case. It is impossible to predict whether unions will be rebuilt, with the technological transformations that are occurring at present – precarious work, automation as well as globalization. Can I predict the path? Absolutely not. As the Chinese say, we have to cross the river while feeling for stones.

You have analysed electoral systems and the mechanisms of political competition. What is your analysis of the Trump victory?

I think the cause of Trump's victory was primarily the extreme inequality of the growth of incomes in the United States in the last 40 years. The average real income of those in the bottom half of the

income distribution *fell by 1%* in the period 1980 -2014. That is, half the population, on average, experienced no real growth of income. In contrast the real income of the top 1% more than doubled (it grew by 205% in this period). I think those in the bottom half vaguely understood this huge inequality in the distribution of the fruits of growth, because they could see how upper middle class people lived on television, on the internet, and so on. One of the most dramatic consequences of this relative impoverishment, and the feelings of futility that it engenders, is the fall in life expectancy of white, middle-aged, uneducated men, due to opiate overdoses. (The last time we saw this phenomenon in a developed country was in Russia in the 1990s, when the life expectancy of men fell due to alcohol related deaths.) Trump was the only candidate who understood this malaise, and he fed it with racism, misogyny, and nativism.

I do not think the genesis of the right-wing movements in Europe is the same, for economic growth has been more evenly distributed in European countries than in the US over this period. Immigration and high unemployment are critical problems in Europe. Despite Trump's appeal to xenophobia, the fear of immigration is not as palpable in the US as it is in many European countries.

Short bio

John Roemer is a mathematician-turned-economist whose research straddles across disciplinary borders, including political philosophy and political science. Roemer obtained his A.B. in mathematics at Harvard College in 1968 and moved onto a PhD in economics at Berkeley. In 1968, during his PhD, he was suspended from the University of California, Berkeley, due to participation and arrest in a demonstration and an occupation to protest against the Vietnam war. As a result, he lost his draft deferment, and taught mathematics in San Francisco secondary schools from 1969 to 1974, before being readmitted to Berkeley where he completed his PhD. His first appointment was at the University of California, Davis, where he remained for 26 years. In 2000, he moved to Yale University where he is currently the Elizabeth S. and A. Varick Stout Professor of Political Science and Economics.

He has published twenty-three books and over two hundred articles in economics, philosophy and political science. He has written on Marxian theory (*Analytical Foundations of Marxian Economic Theory*, 1981, Harvard University Press; *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*, 1982, Harvard University Press; *Value Exploitation and class*, 1986, Harwood Publishers [trad. It.: Valore, Sfruttamento e Classe, Giuffr , 1993]; *Free to lose*, 1988, Harvard University Press), market socialism (*A future for socialism*, 1994, Harvard University Press [trad. It.: Un futuro per il socialismo, Feltrinelli, 1996]), distributive justice (*Theories of Distributive Justice*, 1996, Harvard University Press; *Equality of Opportunity*, 1998, Harvard University Press), and climate change (with H. Llavador and J. Silvestre, *Sustainability for a warming planet*, 2015, Harvard University Press)

On the 18th of December, a workshop will take place at Queen Mary University of London – co-organised by the Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences and the Review of Social Economy – to discuss his last book on cooperative behaviour (*How we do and could cooperate: A Kantian explanation*, forthcoming with Harvard University Press). Participants include Richard Bourke (Queen Mary), Giacomo Corneo (Free University, Berlin), Humberto Llavador (Universitat Pompeu Fabra), Franois Maniquet (Louvain-la-Neuve), Joaquim Silvestre (UC Davis), Alain Trannoy (EHESS), and Karine van Der Straten (Toulouse School of Economics). On the 19th of December, he will be awarded a D.Litt. honoris causa at Queen Mary University of London,