
In this sequel to his 2009 collection, *Philosophy, Politics, Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), Joshua Cohen showcases a further selection of his previously published essays on political philosophy. With characteristic detail and incisiveness, Cohen further explores the ideal of democracy that emerges in the successor volume by locating it in the broader context of a social world characterized at once by reasonable pluralism and extensive interconnectedness. Each essay stands alone as an important contribution to the broader literature; but since all of the essays have already been published individually, the real value of this collection lies in what is gained from reading them alongside one another. In a number of cases, the juxtaposition of essays serves to reinforce the arguments advanced in them. Furthermore, reading these essays together serves to highlight subtle and complex themes in Cohen’s political thought.

In the introduction, Cohen notes that political philosophy is animated by two of the great philosophical questions that Kant identifies in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, namely ‘What should I do?’ and ‘What may I hope?’ (p. 1). The essays in this collection are linked in that they each contribute in some sense to answering these questions by offering insight into how we should structure our political societies such that they are just, and whether we can reasonably hope that the ideal of the just political society will be realized.

The eleven essays in the collection are divided into three sections. The first section, Justice in History, consists only of the volume’s title essay (pp. 15-72), which appears in a slightly extended version of its original. Inspired by Martin Luther King Jr’s claim that ‘the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice’ (quoted on p. 17), Cohen’s aim in this essay is to ascertain whether this is the case—whether ‘ethical explanations can withstand reflective examination’ (p. 17). Cohen concludes that ethical explanations can be valid; for example, he argues that the injustice of slavery provides at least a partial explanation for its demise. Cohen’s argument is based on the uncontroversial thesis that the demise of slavery can be at least partly explained by the widespread belief that slavery is unjust. This, of course, is not sufficient to support a causal connection between the injustice of slavery and its demise, since the belief that slavery is unjust can be held regardless of whether it actually is. However, the crux of Cohen’s argument is that one very good explanation for the belief that slavery is unjust is that slavery is unjust—a
point that a large part of the essay is devoted to supporting. Given that the demise of slavery was at least in part caused by the belief that slavery is unjust, and at least some people who held this belief held it because slavery is in fact unjust, Cohen concludes that the injustice of slavery provides at least a partial explanation for its demise.

Although Cohen’s line of argument is persuasive, it is not obvious that the ethical explanations that can withstand reflective examination are of very much practical interest. As Cohen admits, the fact that a practice is unjust does not entail that it will be stopped. Ethical explanations on Cohen’s account therefore have no predictive power. I doubt, however, that this threatens Cohen’s more general point, which I take to be one about reasonable hope. Returning to the quotation that inspired the discussion, King’s aim was surely not to make some grand prediction about the demise of injustice, but rather to inspire hope for the future. With this in mind, we can understand Cohen as claiming not that the injustice of a practice will inevitably lead to its demise, but rather that the injustice of a practice makes its demise something for which we can reasonably hope.

Although the theme of reasonable hope is explicitly taken up again at several junctures in the second section, Reflections on Democracy, this section is primarily focused on the subject of democracy and its role in the just society. In ‘Structure, Choice, and Legitimacy: Locke’s Theory of the State’ (pp. 75-98), Cohen seeks to reconcile the apparent tension in Locke’s political philosophy between his commitment to equal freedom and rationality, and his institutional belief in the legitimacy of a property owner’s state in which only those who own property are granted the right to political participation. Although in this essay Cohen is not critical of Locke’s political philosophy, the essays that follow expose his commitment to a Rawlsian conception of justice and provide an implicit rejection of the Lockean approach. Whereas Cohen argues that free and equal parties to a Lockean social contract might rationally consent to a system in which they are denied democratic equality, a common current that runs through the subsequent essays is the emphasis on democratic equality as one of the anchors of contemporary liberal theories of justice.

In three essays on Rawls’s political thought, Cohen offers detailed analyses of various aspects of Rawls’s conception of justice that illuminate a number of ongoing debates. In ‘Democratic Equality’ (pp. 99-128), Cohen defends Rawls’s maximin principle of distributive justice by arguing that only it is a natural extension of the widespread commitment to democratic equality. In ‘A More Democratic Liberalism’ (pp. 129-180), he takes up the criticism of Rawls’s theory according to which it is overly dependent on a comprehensive moral liberalism. Cohen traces the evolution of Rawls’s theory from A Theory of Justice to Political Liberalism, focusing on how it was adapted in order to overcome this deficiency. In ‘For a Democratic Society’ (pp. 181-230), Cohen takes on those who have suggested that Rawls’s theory of justice makes inadequate room for democracy by providing a subtle and insightful analysis of the place of democracy in Rawls’s theory of justice.

The final three essays of this section situate Cohen’s views about democracy alongside the radical democratic philosophies of Noam Chomsky, Jurgen