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# Luck Egalitarianism, Exploitation, and the Normative Foundations of Socialism

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**Abstract:** According to a prominent account, the central normative commitments of socialism are a luck egalitarian principle of equality and a principle of community or solidarity. The model has a number of attractions. However, it appears to be vulnerable to a series of objections that have been pressed against luck egalitarian accounts of the concept of exploitation. In this paper I argue that, despite some overlooked flexibility, the exploitation objection represents a serious challenge to this model and provides a good reason to explore alternative accounts of socialism's normative grounds.

**Keywords:** socialism; exploitation; luck egalitarianism; community; solidarity

In their later works, both G. A. Cohen and John Roemer defend models of the normative foundations of socialism in which luck egalitarianism plays a prominent role. On both Cohen's and Roemer's accounts, the heart of the socialist ideal is a commitment to equality (conceived as luck egalitarianism) on the one hand, and a commitment to an ideal of community or solidarity on the other. This model has a number of attractions. However, given that it places a luck egalitarian principle of equality at the heart of the socialist ideal, the model appears to be vulnerable to a series of objections that have been pressed against luck egalitarian accounts of the concept of exploitation in recent years. According to these objections, luck egalitarianism cannot provide a convincing account of what's wrong with exploitation (and it is particularly ill-suited to providing a distinctly *socialist* account of what's wrong with exploitation). The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the strength of the luck egalitarian model of the socialist ideal in the face of these critiques.

Critiques of both luck egalitarianism generally and the luck egalitarian account of exploitation are well-known, and some of the material here will retread those debates. However, those critiques have not yet been analysed as a challenge to the luck egalitarian model of socialism in particular – and as I will argue there are some reasons to think that the luck egalitarian model of socialism is more flexible in the

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face of those critiques than we might first think. Despite this flexibility, however, I argue that the problem of exploitation outlined above does represent a serious challenge to the luck egalitarian account. Whether or not it represents a fatal challenge will depend in important ways on the details of alternative accounts of the socialist ideal.

The paper will proceed as follows. Section 1 briefly recapitulates Cohen's and Roemer's accounts of socialism and argues that they can both be understood as two different explications of the same basic model of socialism's normative foundations, a model I call *luck egalitarianism plus* (or LEP for short). Section 2 describes the problem of exploitation, explains how it presents a serious challenge to the LEP model, and outlines three strategies that a proponent of LEP could adopt in response to it: *reductionism*, *revisionism*, and *appealing to the plus*. Section 3 takes each of these strategies in turn, arguing that, although they show that LEP is more flexible and robust than it has often been taken to be in the literature, they are nevertheless unsatisfactory as responses to the problem of exploitation. Section 4 responds to an objection, and Section 5 concludes with some thoughts about the implications of this for contemporary research on the normative foundations of socialism.

Before starting out with our characterisation of LEP, it will be helpful to say a few words about methodology. This essay is an exercise in evaluating and constructing different theoretical accounts of the normative foundations of socialism. What does this mean? The general idea is this. There are various claims about the moral status of institutional structures and social phenomena that socialists typically make, claims such as that capitalism is exploitative, that exploitation is objectionable, that common ownership of the means of production would be desirable, and so on. Not every person who is a socialist will make all of these claims, but these claims are nevertheless typical of socialist commitment. I'll be calling claims like this first-order claims of socialist politics. We can contrast these first-order socialist claims with second-order claims about the kinds of values that socialists take to be important, and which can be used to provide explanations and justifications for first-order claims – as in 'socialists prize a certain conception of freedom', 'socialists find exploitation objectionable because they place high value on community', or 'a large number of first-order socialist claims can be grounded in the value of equality'.

In the following I will assume two things. First, I take it that the task of providing a theoretical account of the normative foundations of socialism is a matter of providing a second-order characterisation of the socialist ideal that allows us to provide convincing explanations and justifications of the first-order claims that are characteristic of socialist politics. Secondly, I take it that the right way to go about the task of providing such a theoretical account is the method of reflective equilibrium – we search for simple and plausible second-order principles that can explain and justify as many first-order claims as possible, allowing that sometimes

considerations of second-order plausibility might give us some reason to revise our first-order intuitions, and vice versa (Rawls 1999, 17–8).

The socialist tradition is a big tent, and (to put it mildly) there is ample room for disagreement about what counts as a plausible characterisation of socialism at either the first- or second-order level (Arnold 2016a; Gilabert and O'Neill 2019). Consequently, the intuitions appealed to in what follows have and will undoubtedly be disputed by many within the socialist tradition. Moreover, in the face of such debate, the whole idea of a search for a simple set of principles that can provide satisfactory normative foundations for socialism might seem futile. Nevertheless, as recent debates regarding socialism's normative foundations show, striving for such an account can advance our understanding of why socialists tend to think the things they do and whether those commitments are reasonable. (This is not rare in philosophy. Often, at first glance, the surface phenomena seem too messy and diverse as to be susceptible to fruitful general analysis, and yet attempts to cut through the noise surprise us in the insight they provide.) With the spirit of this sort of inquiry in mind, I hope that the major line of argument presented here captures at least one important strand of socialist thought and that its exploration can therefore provide a useful contribution to the ongoing project of better understanding the normative foundations of socialism.

## 1 Luck Egalitarianism Plus

In this section I introduce the luck egalitarianism plus model of the normative foundations of socialism, which has been defended at length by both G. A. Cohen (2009) and John Roemer (2017).<sup>1</sup> The two accounts differ in some important respects, and each has received extensive discussion of its respective specific details in the philosophical literature.<sup>2</sup> However, the two accounts share enough to be thought of as two specific instances of the same general type of approach to the normative foundations of socialism – a general type that is worth investigating in its own right.

The general model is this. At the level of fundamental principles, a commitment to socialism entails a commitment to a principle of equality on the one hand, and a principle of community or solidarity on the other. The principle of equality holds that none should be left worse off than any other through no fault or choice of their own,

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1 I focus on these works here as they are the places where Cohen and Roemer most explicitly present their views as accounts of socialism's philosophical foundations. But it's worth noting that they draw upon decades of broader research. For representative (but far from exhaustive) examples of this research, see the papers collected in Cohen (2008, 2011) and Roemer (1994, 1996).

2 For extended discussion and critique of Roemer's account, see Vrousalis (2021). For discussion of Cohen's, see Nielsen and Albertsen (2022), Roemer (2010), Steiner (2014), and Vrousalis (2015).

thus condemning inequalities that arise as a result of ‘brute luck’ (Cohen 2009, 18; Roemer 2017, 263).<sup>3</sup> This principle condemns a great deal of the economic inequality that one finds in contemporary capitalist societies, as it condemns the institutions and structures that generate and protect that inequality. Since a considerable amount of that inequality constitutes involuntary advantage and disadvantage, it constitutes unjust inequality, and socialist egalitarianism condemns it.

However, there are nevertheless a series of important inequalities that are not condemned by this luck egalitarian principle of equality. These are inequalities that result from either regrettable choice or option luck.<sup>4</sup> In regrettable choice cases, individuals make choices under conditions of full responsibility, but the choices they make leave them worse off than others, such that they come to regret those choices. In option luck cases, individuals make what they take to be reasonable gambles under conditions of full responsibility, and the gambles fail to pay off, again leaving them worse off than others. In both of these kinds of cases, inequalities seem to arise of which we cannot say that any one person is worse off than another through no fault or choice of their own. And so these kinds of inequalities appear to be acceptable by the lights of the luck egalitarian construal of the socialist conception of equality (Cohen 2009, 26–32; Roemer 2017, 309–10).

However, though these two kinds of inequalities might not fall afoul of the socialist principle of equality of opportunity, the LEP model holds that most socialists will nevertheless still find many such inequalities objectionable, because they contradict the second major principle of the socialist ideal: the principle of community or solidarity. On Cohen’s (2009) construal, the ‘principle of community’ requires that ‘people care about, and where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another’ (35). (This requires both that inequalities of condition are not so great as to obstruct such caring, and that individuals interact with a spirit of communal reciprocity in which they seek to both serve and be served by others, rather than simply to elicit as much service for

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3 Cohen and Roemer both dub the principle ‘socialist equality of opportunity’, but it is recognizable as the luck egalitarian position that both Cohen and Roemer had developed and defended elsewhere in their work (e.g. Cohen 2011; Roemer 1996). Brute luck is just luck for which we cannot (reasonably) hold the individual in question responsible. Brute luck can be contrasted with option luck, which is luck for which we can hold individuals responsible, such as luck that results from fully informed, calculated gambles. (See Dworkin 1981, 293, for the classic account of the distinction between brute and option luck.)

4 Cohen’s regrettable choice/option luck distinction parallels the imprudent choice/option luck distinction that is widely used in the literature on luck egalitarianism (see, e.g., Anderson 1999, *passim*). Cohen’s terminology has a slight advantage over the more common usage, since someone may well not regret an imprudent gamble (for example, if they’re extremely unaverse to risk), and an imprudent gambler with no regrets is probably better assimilated to the regular case of prudent option luck than cases like the grasshopper and the ant in which the imprudent choice is regretted.

themselves as possible while serving others as little as possible in return (2009, 35–9).) On Roemer's (2017) construal, luck egalitarianism is better supplemented with what he calls 'cooperation or solidarity', according to which individuals should aim to do their part in whatever coordinated decision they would most like the community to take, rather than seeking to maximise their own returns, taking the actions of others as a given (307–8).<sup>5</sup>

Cohen and Roemer thus present two alternative accounts of the fundamental values that ground socialist commitments. Though both endorse a luck egalitarian principle of equality, each supplements that principle with an alternative additional principle, and as a result the two models provide philosophical foundations for importantly different sets of institutional and policy reforms.<sup>6</sup> However, despite these important differences, the two models share the same underlying structure, such that it will be useful for us to treat them as two species of the same broad type of model of the philosophical foundations of socialism. Three important shared features will be of particular importance for us.

First, note that for both Cohen and Roemer, the 'plus' component of their view provides additional reasons to support further equality of economic conditions that are not provided by the principle of socialist equality of opportunity, such that the furthest reaches of the radical egalitarian distributive policies that socialists tend to support will be justified by reference to the value of community or solidarity, rather than equality. Secondly, and relatedly, for both models there are important and particular limits to the scope of distinctly egalitarian concern with respect to traditional socialist commitments. Only if it can be condemned by luck egalitarianism can a particular phenomenon be taken to be condemned by the value of equality; otherwise, if it can be condemned at all, it must be by community or solidarity. And thirdly, for both Cohen and Roemer it is only equality that is to be understood as a requirement of justice (Cohen 2009, 13; Roemer 2017, 263). Given the limitations to the scope of egalitarian concern just described, there are thus definite and particular limits to how much of first-order socialist commitment can be grounded on a commitment to justice alone.

Given these important similarities, I propose to treat the two models as two instances of the same general type, luck egalitarianism plus.<sup>7</sup> Though I will keep

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<sup>5</sup> Roemer (2019) has elaborated on this account at length.

<sup>6</sup> The two models clash most clearly on the vexed question of socialism's compatibility with markets. Providing philosophical foundations for traditional socialist opposition to markets is one of Cohen's major objectives (2009, 39–45); establishing that socialism need not require any such opposition is one of Roemer's (2017, 311).

<sup>7</sup> This name is in one way unfortunate, as it could be read to imply that the plus component of the view is less significant than the luck egalitarianism and is simply tacked on as an afterthought. That's

Cohen's and Roemer's models in hand as prime instances of LEP, the arguments will carry over to any alternative that shares the same basic underlying structure.

## 2 The Problem of Exploitation

The LEP model has many attractions as an account of the normative foundations of socialism. As Cohen's and Roemer's contributions demonstrate, the model employs a parsimonious, powerful, and intuitive characterisation of the socialist ideal to provide justifications and explanations of a broad range of important socialist first-order claims. Moreover, the employment of a principle of community or solidarity alongside the principle of equality allows them to evade some classic critiques of luck egalitarianism as implausibly silent on political questions regarding the quality and character of social relations.<sup>8</sup> However, the model faces a serious challenge: the problem of exploitation. Consider the following case:

### *Ant and Grasshopper*

Suppose that Ant and Grasshopper start with equal resources and equal capacities. Grasshopper spends the summer months idling and singing, while Ant toils to build up a reserve of resources ahead of winter. When the snow starts falling, Grasshopper turns up at Ant's door, asking for shelter and sustenance. Ant agrees to provide these necessities, but only on the condition that Grasshopper sign a sweatshop contract with Ant, committing herself to labouring for Ant for the next six months. In accordance with the contract, Ant will keep the lion's share of the product. Grasshopper needs the shelter and sustenance, and so signs.<sup>9</sup>

The basic thought behind the problem of exploitation is this. In the case just described, Ant exploits Grasshopper. Moreover, this situation of exploitation is the sort of thing that socialists should find troubling, precisely because it seems to offend against their egalitarian commitments. These are data that putative philosophical theories of socialism should be able to account for. A theory of socialism that failed to see this situation as something that socialists should object to would be suspect for that very reason. But luck egalitarianism, and LEP by extension, cannot seem to account for these data. Because, according to luck egalitarianism, there is no egalitarian objection to the inequality that obtains between Ant and Grasshopper, since,

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certainly not the case – for Cohen (2009) at least, there's good reason to think that the principle of community is just as (and perhaps even more) important than the principle of equality (37).

<sup>8</sup> For classic versions of this critique, see Anderson (1999), Scheffler (2003), and Wolff (1998). For defence of Cohen's and Roemer's considered positions from this charge see Lippert-Rasmussen (2018, 230–4) and Roemer (2017, 310).

<sup>9</sup> For discussion of this case in the context of philosophical discussions of the nature of exploitation, see Vrousalis (2013, 150; 2016, 534–5), and Arneson (2016, 11).

by hypothesis, it is not true that either is worse off than the other through no fault or choice of their own (Cohen 2009, 26–8).

More generally, the problem of exploitation makes use of the following idea. Luck egalitarianism is a *historical* principle; it holds that whether a situation counts as egalitarian or not is crucially dependent upon the history of that situation.<sup>10</sup> But our intuitions about exploitation seem robustly independent of history. As Alan Carling puts the point:

Take, for example, a case in which I am at the bottom of a deep, dark hole and someone offers to throw me a rope for a million pounds. For this to be exploitation, does it matter how I got there? I may have created the situation inadvertently by my own actions: stumbling down the hole while preoccupied with thinking out the distinction between exploitation and extortion. It may have been an act of God, which caught me in an earthquake. It may have been an unintended consequence of ancient mining operations ... Neither the causal nor the intentional sequence seems necessary to the finding of exploitation. (Carling 1987, 184)<sup>11</sup>

It doesn't matter how one came to be at the bottom of the hole, if one is offered rescue in return for a million pounds, or the signing of a sweatshop contract, one is exploited and one is in precisely the sort of situation that socialists should take to be a central case of concern. And if a particular putative theory of socialism cannot account for that, so much the worse for that theory.<sup>12</sup>

To put things in the terms of reflective equilibrium, the problem of exploitation alleges that there is an important first-order commitment of socialism (the claim that exploitation occurs in cases like Ant and Grasshopper) that LEP cannot provide a convincing justification or explanation for. Given the structure of LEP, there thus seems to be three general strategies that a proponent of LEP interested in defending the theory against the objection could appeal to. First, a defender of LEP could simply deny that the first-order commitment is constitutive of socialist commitment. Rather,

<sup>10</sup> For the seminal discussion of historical principles in political philosophy, see Nozick (1974, 153–5). For useful discussion of the application of the idea to exploitation, see Vrousalis (2016, 535).

<sup>11</sup> Vrousalis makes extensive parallel use of a similar 'pit case' across his work on exploitation (2013, 2016, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Though this precise formulation of the problem of exploitation as a general objection to the LEP model of socialism's philosophical foundations may be new, the basic idea has played an important role in philosophical work on both equality and exploitation for some decades. In the exploitation literature, variations of the pit case and similar cases have been used to question attempts to understand exploitation in terms of historical principles – from Carling's (1987, 184) use of the pit case, to Vrousalis's extended use of it in his critiques of luck egalitarianism (and, more broadly, distributive) conceptions of exploitation (2013, 2016, 2023; see too Bajaj 2015). In the literature on equality, exploitation has likewise long played a role in the critique of distributive conceptions of equality – see fn. 23. For helpful explanation and critique of Cohen's own attempts to render his luck egalitarianism consistent with principled opposition to exploitation, see Vrousalis (2014).

socialists might simply have to jettison the claim that there is objectionable exploitation in Ant and Grasshopper, thereby revising socialism at the first-order level in order to bring it into line with our best second-order account of it. (Let's call this strategy *revisionism*.) Secondly, a defender of LEP could argue that, despite first appearances, the first-order claim in question is in fact condemnable by the lights of luck egalitarian equality. The defender of LEP might thereby be able to reduce the case to terms that luck egalitarianism can condemn. (Let's call this strategy *reductionism*.) And finally, a defender of LEP could concede that their model cannot condemn the exploitation in Ant and Grasshopper on grounds of equality but argue that it can nevertheless be condemned on grounds of community or solidarity. (Let's call this strategy *appealing to the plus*.) Let's take each strategy in turn.

### 3 Why LEP Can't Avoid the Problem of Exploitation

#### 3.1 Why Revisionism Won't Work

First, let's consider revisionism – the claim that socialists should simply jettison their commitment to the claim that there is objectionable exploitation in cases like Ant and Grasshopper. The general strategy looks promising at first pass, and indeed this is the approach that Roemer takes, arguing that socialists should abandon the concept of exploitation altogether in favour of a luck egalitarian principle of distributive justice (1994, 65–96; 2017, 274–5). This is, after all, how reflective equilibrium works. Sometimes we have to jettison first-order intuitions when they clash with second-order principles which we have good independent reason to accept.

To see the problem with the revisionist strategy, consider the following case:

##### *Cleanly Generated Capitalism*

Suppose we have a society inhabited by ten ants and 1,000 grasshoppers. Suppose that they begin with an equal share of society's capital stock. Everyone works an equal amount, for equal pay. Suppose then that a few cycles of the seasons come and pass, and through the ants' superior applications of care and effort, the ants come to accumulate a considerable quantity of capital each, while the grasshoppers fritter away their initial capital stock and end up with no capital holdings. The ants then employ the grasshoppers for long hours and low pay. The grasshoppers make subsistence wages for the rest of their lives, while the ants reap large profits without doing any work themselves.

Intuitively, the situation that obtains in Cleanly Generated Capitalism is one that involves both exploitation and unjust inequality. But, just as in Ant and Grasshopper, it's hard to see how a luck egalitarian principle of equality could condemn it as such. In line with the thought that drives the problem of exploitation (and which is



expressed in the quote from Carling above) our judgement that there is objectionable exploitation in the economic situation that results in Cleanly Generated Capitalism does not seem to depend on historical facts about the genesis of that situation. No matter how a situation like that came about, we have a strong intuition that it represents an objectionably exploitative state of affairs. But the revisionist response we're envisaging would have to deny this (e.g., Roemer 2017, 272–3).<sup>13</sup> The revisionist response to the problem of exploitation thus seems to clash with some powerful and important intuitions.

Moreover, we might think that the intuition that such exploitation is unjust even when its etiology is 'clean' by luck egalitarian standards is a core socialist insight, one that any putative account of socialism's philosophical foundations can abandon only at serious cost. There is a long line of thought in the socialist tradition, stretching back at least as far as Chapter XXIV of the first volume of Marx's *Capital*, according to which exploitation and injustice can indeed arise through the sorts of clean histories depicted in the Cleanly Generated Capitalism case above.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, for many, one of the great promised insights of socialist political theory is its potential to explain the lingering sense that the apparent equality that obtains in 'capitalist acts between consenting adults' (Nozick 1974, 163) can often mask a more subtle (but pernicious) inequality – the sort of inequality that obtains whenever one person toils to sustain the life of another, who wields power over them and uses that power to extract labour from them.<sup>15</sup> It is this thought that lies behind the idea, familiar from across the socialist tradition, that capitalism is inherently unjust, rather than simply contingently unjust as a result of the fact that its actual history has been far from clean.<sup>16</sup> And it is this thought that seems to receive expression in our strong sense

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**13** Note that the revisionist is not just committed to the (more plausible) claim that Cleanly Generated Capitalism cases are less exploitative and less unequalitarian than unclean ones. Rather, they must claim that Cleanly Generated Capitalism is not at all exploitative or unequalitarian, since there is no luck unequalitarian inequality to ground any such charge.

**14** See the famous discussion of capital accumulation 'by his own labour and that of his forefathers' ([1867] 1967, 582).

**15** It is this powerful sense of an important inequality lurking behind the surface equality of the wage labour contract that Marx describes brilliantly in the summary to Chapter VI of *Capital*, where after leaving the sphere of exchange, in which 'alone rules Freedom, Equality, Property, and Bentham ... we think we can perceive a change in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae. He, who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as capitalist; the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business; the other, timid and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to market and has nothing to expect but – a hiding.' ([1867] 1967, 176).

**16** It is sometimes claimed that Marx did not believe that capitalism was inherently unjust in this sense, on the grounds that unless we suppose that he did not so believe we are unable to explain why he goes to such great lengths in Part VIII of *Capital* to demonstrate that the actual history of

that there is exploitation in the Cleanly Generated Capitalism case described above, and that there is something distinctly and objectionably inequalitarian about the situation that emerges from it.

The revisionist response thus seems to carry a very high cost. Though that high cost might still have to be paid if the reflective equilibrium chips fall hard enough in favour of LEP, theorists of socialism's normative grounds should think long and hard before they conclude that's the case. If alternative accounts of socialism's philosophical foundations can be devised which avoid this cost without incurring further theoretical costs in other respects, the problem of exploitation appears to provide us with a strong reason to pursue those alternatives to LEP.

### 3.2 Why Reductionism Won't Work

The reductionist method for responding to the problem of exploitation holds that, despite first appearances, the exploitation in cases like Ant and Grasshopper and Cleanly Generated Capitalism can in fact be condemned by the lights of luck egalitarianism. Reductionism may at first seem like a nonstarter as a response to the problem of exploitation. After all, cases such as Ant and Grasshopper and Cleanly Generated Capitalism are, *ex hypothesi*, instances of inequalities for which the worse-off are entirely responsible. There are, however, two important arguments that it will be worth our while to consider. The first is an argument made by Anca Gheaus (2018) that purports to provide a reductionist method for accommodating certain important kinds of inequalities with luck egalitarian resources, even when those inequalities involve clear cases of responsible choice. The core idea behind Gheaus's proposal is this. There are some goods which have a considerable influence on how well people's lives go (and thus on their levels of welfare and advantage) but which are such that they can only be enjoyed by any one individual if they are generally exhibited by society at large. These goods include what Gheaus calls *democratic relational goods*, or DRGs – such as the goods of living in a society in which there is little social hierarchy, or a significant ethos of solidaristic concern. If DRGs make a significant contribution to the welfare and advantage of particular individuals in a society, Gheaus urges, then there will be a clear luck egalitarian

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capitalism's genesis was very much not a clean one (e.g., Roemer 2017, 271–2). Demonstrating that Marx did subscribe to the relevant claim is beyond the scope of our task here, but it is worth pointing out that the above exegetical argument is far from conclusive – there is no reason, to my knowledge, to think that Marx's efforts in Part VIII of *Capital* are not best read *ad arguendo*, in the sense that his claim is that even if it *were* the case that (as is in fact false) capitalism would be just if it had emerged cleanly, that *still* cannot constitute a defence of actually existing capitalism, given the facts of the historical record.

reason for ensuring that these goods are available to those who have not forfeited their right to them through regrettable but responsible choice. In cases where some individuals do make regrettable but responsible choices that land them in situations that threaten DRGs, such as might happen in exploitation cases, we will then have a luck egalitarian rationale for rescuing them, because if we were not to do so we would leave third parties involuntarily worse off than they otherwise would have been, by virtue of depriving them of the welfare and advantage that comes from living in a society structured by DRGs (60–64).

Gheaus's reductionist approach is an ingenious way of avoiding some of the classic relational egalitarian objections to distributive egalitarianism, like the harshness objection (Anderson 1999; Voigt 2007). But it suffers from a major flaw as an attempted defence of LEP for our purposes. Gheaus's line manages to ground a luck egalitarian complaint against cases like Ant and Grasshopper. But it provides precisely the wrong sort of ground in the context of debates about the philosophical foundations of socialism. Because according to Gheaus's line it is only third parties who are the victims of unjust inequality in the two cases. Even if we assume, with Gheaus, that the best way of rectifying this injustice is to protect the worse off from exploitation, this protection will be done for the sake of third parties, who may well be considerably better off. This is both deeply counterintuitive and deeply at odds with the traditional socialist objection to exploitation. That objection is clearly that it is those who are exploited (i.e., the grasshoppers in Cleanly Generated Capitalism) who are the victims of unjust inequality, not (potentially privileged) third parties. A Gheaus-style reductionist response to the problem of exploitation thus secures the claim that there is unjust inequality in cases like Cleanly Generated Capitalism only at the significant cost of (a) an implausible account of the nature of that unjust inequality, and (b) the betrayal of the spirit of the core intuition that drives the problem of exploitation in the first place.

The second reductionist strategy employs Serena Olsaretti's work on luck egalitarianism and the question of stakes (2009, 2013). For our purposes, Olsaretti's central point is this: luck egalitarianism might be correct to attempt to accommodate the idea of responsibility by insisting on the significance of the choice/circumstance distinction. But Cohenite luck egalitarianism is married to an implausible view of what the stakes of people's choices should be. Though luck egalitarians may be right to suppose that equality requires that people face the consequences of their responsible choices, there is no uncontroversial way of deciding the appropriate size and character of those consequences. Thus, one might think that equality does require that somebody in the pit case should be worse off than others if they end up trapped in a pit through their own responsible choices. But one might think that equality condemns a situation in which they end up so badly off that they are forced to sign a sweatshop contract. In other words, one might think that equality is consistent with people being worse off than others when

their situation is the result of responsible choice without thinking that it is consistent with them being *that* much worse off. The stakes, one might think, shouldn't be that high. The implication for our debate is that one might think that LEP can avoid the problem of exploitation by making use of a more plausible theory of stakes – of the consequences that it is reasonable to require others to face as a result of their responsible choices. If the most plausible version of luck egalitarianism holds that being forced to sign a sweatshop contract is too high a cost to impose on the choice to, for example, spend the summer singing rather than working, then perhaps luck egalitarianism can condemn the exploitative offers in cases like Cleanly Generated Capitalism as contrary to the demands of equality. Those cases would transgress equality by imposing too harsh a penalty on certain kinds of choices.

A modified LEP with a different theory of stakes is a serious contender for a satisfactory form of reductionism that could rescue the LEP model from the problem of exploitation. Nevertheless (and although a full exploration of this possibility would take us too far afield here) I think there are some good preliminary reasons to doubt that this strategy could succeed either. The main obstacle to a stakes-based reductionism is that the resultant view seems to collapse into an alternative to, rather than a version of, luck egalitarianism.<sup>17</sup> The first problem is just that the view will now contain an alternative component – the attached theory of stakes – that may well answer to values other than equality. For example, Olsaretti's preferred solution to the problem of stakes is to ground a theory of stakes in something like Cohen's principle of community. Penalties should be attached to choices in such a way as to maintain community as best as possible over time (2013, 62). On such a view, luck egalitarianism is no longer an attempt to articulate only what equality requires; it is, at least, considerably shaped by the requirements of community. This represents a serious departure from the original luck egalitarian program pursued by the likes of Cohen and Roemer. Indeed, as a response to the problem of exploitation, it seems better described as appealing to the plus than reductionism, and so it seems likely to run into the criticisms of appealing to the plus raised in the next section.

The second problem is that the additional component will most likely introduce new requirements that will pull even further away from the original impulses of luck egalitarianism. On a communitarian theory of stakes, for example, the appeal to Cohenite community seems to undermine placing the sort of emphasis on the choice/circumstance distinction that characterises the central luck egalitarian impulse, since, as Cohen argues, his conception of community condemns even those inequalities of condition which arise from regrettable choice or option luck. Or

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<sup>17</sup> To be clear, that may be no problem for Olsaretti's own stakes-based account of the requirements of egalitarian justice. But it is a problem for the attempt to use that account as a defence of a distinctly luck egalitarian approach to the philosophical foundations of socialism.

consider a plausible alternative to Olsaretti's preferred approach to stakes: suppose we were to develop a theory of stakes that is designed to maintain not communal relations over time, but egalitarian relations, attaching penalties to choices that will minimise the emergence of inequalitarian social relations by preventing power inequalities, discouraging hierarchies of esteem and so on. Such an approach may well provide a plausible theory of stakes. But it's not clear why we would want to describe this theory as a luck egalitarian account of equality, as opposed to a relational egalitarian one. Moreover, again, if we've admitted that relational egalitarian considerations are in the driving seat for a theory of stakes, shouldn't our sensitivity to those considerations also give us reasons to care about relational inequalities quite apart from considerations of the choice/circumstance distinction?

Olsaretti's revisions to the classical luck egalitarian program thus seems likely to yield a very different theory, with far fewer counterintuitive implications. But precisely because its spirit and content would be so different from classical luck egalitarianism, it's hard to see why we should describe such an account as a version of luck egalitarianism at all, rather than simply as an altogether alternative account of what equality requires (or indeed an account of something else entirely.) And it's therefore hard to see how it could be used to defend a distinctly luck egalitarian approach to socialism. Indeed, the two reductionist strategies just overviewed suggest that the reductionist approach to the problem of exploitation faces the following dilemma. Either the novel account of luck egalitarianism's requirements cleaves too closely to the original, and so retains its counterintuitive implications, or it avoids those counterintuitive implications by revising the original so heavily as to undermine any claim to continuity with it. As an attempt to rescue the LEP model of socialism, appealing to democratic relational goods falls on the first horn of that dilemma. Stakes-based reductionism falls on the second. The prospects of a successful reductionist response thus look slender.

### 3.3 Why Appealing to the Plus Won't Work

In the previous two sections we reviewed the prospects of revisionist and reductionist methods of resolving the problem of exploitation and found them unlikely to yield satisfactory responses. This leaves our third and final method: appealing to the plus. Such a response could start by pointing out that in cases where exploitation is the result of luck egalitarian inequality (and, we might add, this might be thought to cover the vast majority of important real-world cases of exploitation), there is a straightforward luck egalitarian complaint of unjust inequality against the exploitative situation. But even in contrived cases like Ant and Grasshopper and Cleanly Generated Capitalism, where we may have no grounds for a complaint on grounds of equality, we may still have a complaint on grounds of community or solidarity.

Appealing to the plus seems an attractive way of dealing with counterexamples like Ant and Grasshopper and Cleanly Generated Capitalism. Though those cases don't seem to involve any luck egalitarian inequality, they do seem to involve clear breaches of solidarity and community. With regard to Cohen's principle of community, the exploitative offers that are extended clearly fail to instantiate communal caring and reciprocity. With regard to Roemer's principle of solidarity, the offers likewise do not seem to be instances of solidaristic thinking. The ants are clearly seeking to maximise their own advantage in their interactions with others, rather than seeking to play their part in a coordinated response to a collective problem.

With these ideas to hand, the defender of either Cohenite or Roemerian LEP might be able to respond to the problem of exploitation as follows. LEP may not be able to object to all cases of exploitation *on grounds of equality*, but (a) it can provide an egalitarian objection to any exploitation that does involve luck egalitarian inequality, and (b) even in those (rare) cases where luck egalitarian inequality is not involved, LEP can still provide a distinctly socialist objection to exploitation on grounds of community or solidarity, instead of equality. LEP can thus ground a principled socialist objection to exploitation, *per se*. And if so, why does it matter that it cannot ground that exploitation on the value of equality exclusively? Though equality is certainly a core value in the socialist tradition, it is by no means the only such value. It should therefore be no embarrassment to a putative account of socialism's philosophical foundations if it doesn't manage to ground every first-order socialist commitment on the value of equality alone.

However, there are two important problems that face attempts to use appealing to the plus as a way to defend LEP from the problem of exploitation. First, if the proposed LEP account of socialist opposition to exploitation in cases such as Cleanly Generated Capitalism is correct, then in those cases such opposition is grounded not in equality but in community or solidarity. But given that Cohen and Roemer both make equality, but not solidarity or community, a requirement of justice, it follows that there can be no socialist opposition to those cases on grounds of justice. And this might be thought to generate a problem for the following reason. There is a long and widely held view in political philosophy according to which justice bears a special priority over other values in the evaluation of social institutions. In Rawls's words, there is a strong 'intuitive conviction of the primacy of justice'.

Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory however elegant and economical must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise laws and institutions no matter how efficient and well-arranged must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust ... The only thing that permits us to acquiesce in an erroneous theory is the lack of a better one; analogously, an injustice is tolerable only when it is necessary to avoid an even greater injustice. (1999, 3)

Now, a more sophisticated theorisation of this rough articulation of our intuition of the primacy of justice is no doubt in order to work out the precise parameters and implications of such a view. But the rough articulation suffices for our current purposes. Because if justice does hold the sort of primacy indicated by Rawls, shifting the grounds of exploitation charges from equality (and thus justice) to solidarity or community will have important implications for the status and quality of those charges. Though they may still carry a good deal of moral weight, they will not carry the same sort of significance as justice claims and will have to cede to such claims in cases of conflict.

The force of this problem should not be overstated. Since LEP will still be able to ground all cases of exploitation which do involve luck egalitarian inequality in complaints of justice, it is only those fringe cases of cleanly generated exploitation that LEP will have to criticise on grounds other than justice. Moreover, one might think that the primacy of justice has less purchase in the socialist tradition than the liberal anyway; Cohen (2009) strongly suggests that justice will not always take priority over other values in his brief discussion of value conflict, and it might be argued that the traditional socialist emphasis on the value of solidarity and community contains the seeds of the rejection of the primacy of justice for similar reasons (37).<sup>18</sup> However, the problem is nevertheless significant. For if the arguments of Section 3.1 are correct, those engaged in the task of producing normative foundations for socialism should be very reluctant to jettison the idea that cases like Cleanly Generated Capitalism involve moral wrongs with the same kind of moral weightiness as cases of exploitation which involve straightforward inequality of opportunity along luck egalitarian lines. Given the intuitive power of the idea of the primacy of justice, the socialist theorist who wishes to ground the wrong involved in

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**18** See too Honneth (2017, 6–26) for an account of the socialist ideal that is amenable to this interpretation. It's also worth noting that Cohen (2008) offers independent considerations against the primacy of justice, albeit in a somewhat different dialectical context (302–306). Moreover, rejecting the primacy of justice is likely to be significantly less costly for a Cohenite vision of justice than a Rawlsian. Rawls's understanding of justice is in various respects considerably more expansive than Cohen's – encompassing, arguably, liberty and aspects of relational equality (e.g. through the idea of the social basis of self-respect), as well as community and fraternity. Given Cohen's more limited understanding of justice as requiring a luck egalitarian distribution of access to advantage, denying justice's primacy will be less costly for Cohen than it is for Rawls. However, even if this is right, conceding the primacy of justice still seems to me to be a significant concession, albeit a less significant one than on a more Rawlsian picture. After all, though Rawls and Cohen give different accounts of what justice requires, they're both attempting to give accounts of the same thing (i.e., justice) and quite aside from the details of those accounts, justice seems to have a sort of special status in our thinking about political morality that lends independent support to the hypothesis of the primacy of justice (if not to Rawls's particular account thereof). My sincere thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this point.

Cleanly Generated Capitalism on values other than justice must either provide us with a reason to reject justice's primacy or abandon the important intuition that exploitation cases like Cleanly Generated Capitalism retain their moral character across different etiologies.

This brings us to the second criticism of appealing to the plus as a method for responding to the problem of exploitation. Irrespective of the primacy of justice, appealing to the plus saddles the defender of LEP with an account that provides a poor fit for important socialist judgements about cases like Ant and Grasshopper and Cleanly Generated Capitalism. In particular, appealing to the plus seems to clash with two important judgements about such cases: an intuition regarding their relative moral parity when compared with cases of exploitation which involve luck egalitarian inequality; and an intuition regarding the distinctly unequal nature of the wrong in such cases.

With regard to the first intuition, appealing to the plus involves arguing that amongst cases of objectionable exploitation there is an important moral fault line, dividing cases which involve luck egalitarian inequality, and can therefore be condemned on grounds of equality, and cases which do not involve any such inequality, like Cleanly Generated Capitalism. But this clashes directly with the intuition that our moral judgement of exploitation cases does not vary according to etiology, or at least not along the lines of the choice/circumstance distinction that is so central to luck egalitarianism. No matter how the grasshoppers end up propertyless, or no matter how the entrapped person finds themselves at the bottom of the pit in Carling's pit case, we should have a similar objection to the exploitation that occurs in each case. (This is not to say that certain, particularly objectionable, etiological differences might not still make an important difference in these cases. See Section 4 for further discussion.) That objection does not seem to depend on prior facts about the history of the cases, but rather the bare facts of how the individuals in each case interact and relate to one another – relational facts which are insensitive to etiological variation along the choice/circumstance divide.

With regard to the second intuition, appealing to the plus also faces the significant problem that it involves a flat denial of the claim that there is a distinctly egalitarian critique of the exploitation that we find in cases like Cleanly Generated Capitalism. But such cases, as we saw in Section 3.1, don't just seem to be wrong; they seem to involve a wrong with a distinctly unequal flavour. The relationship envisaged between the ants and the grasshoppers is one in which the latter are effectively rendered the servants of the former.<sup>19</sup> To classify such wrongs as failures of community or solidarity – failures to care adequately for one another or to conceive of one's situation in adequately collective terms, rather than failures to relate to one another as equals – is to misdescribe the moral quality of the situation. The evils of Cleanly Generated Capitalism do seem to exhibit the distinctly

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<sup>19</sup> This is a core idea in Vrousalis's (2023) account of exploitation as domination (37–91).



inegalitarian ills of hierarchy, domination, and subordination. The grasshoppers do not seem to only have a claim that they have not been extended adequate community or solidarity by the ants (though they certainly have that too). They also seem to have a claim against being treated as the ants' subordinates and inferiors. If these intuitions about the moral quality of the wrongs involved in cases like Cleanly Generated Capitalism are correct, then appealing to the plus seems ultimately unattractive as a response to the problem of exploitation. It purchases that response only at the considerable expense of an account that seems to fundamentally miscomprehend the moral nature of the core phenomenon.

This final point is also helpful for showing why an alternative kind of 'appeal to the plus' is similarly unpromising. According to this thought, the sorts of relations envisaged by ideals of solidarity and community are not substantially different from those envisaged by certain relational ideals of equality (Tomlin 2015, 153–4; Roemer 2017, 310). As such, we might be tempted to redescribe the 'plus' component of LEP as in fact an egalitarian requirement – a requirement of relational equality, sitting next to the distributive equality mandated by luck egalitarianism. Particularly if we amend the standard formulation of LEP to hold that the plus component is also a requirement of justice, we might think that LEP can appeal to the plus without running into the objections presented in this section – Cleanly Generated Capitalism will be condemned as unjust just as much as unclean cases, and though there will be a difference in the specifics of the normative diagnosis of cases that fall on different sides of the choice/circumstance line, that difference will not track a distinction between egalitarian and inegalitarian objections.

My first response to this suggestion is to point out that the resulting picture has come some distance from the LEP models of Cohen and Roemer, so much so that it seems a stretch to describe them as instances of the same model (employing, as they do, fundamentally different understandings of justice, equality, community, and solidarity). But setting that aside, it's also worth noting that the attempt to subsume an ideal of relational equality within an ideal of communal or solidaristic relating is likely to meet some serious problems, because the sort of communal concern and care associated with solidarity and community seems to be importantly distinct from the equal respect and equal status associated with relations of equality. The most obvious way to put the worry is that, at least on the face of it, it doesn't seem difficult to think of social relations that exhibit considerable degrees of Cohenite communal caring or a Roemerian cooperative ethos without the parties to the relevant relations relating to one another on equal terms, and vice versa. Think, for example, of a caring relationship between a husband and wife in a patriarchal society, or, for the inverse, two rivalrous boxers eyeing each other before a bout, brimming with respect for an equal adversary, but intent on thwarting each other's ends.

The philosophical waters start to run a little deep here, but the basic thought can be illustrated by indulging a spatial metaphor: while failures of relational equality involve vertical relations of higher ups to lower downs, failures of solidarity or community operate on a horizontal dimension, of closeness and distance. In Niko Kolodny's words, the point of ideals like solidarity and community is 'to reject separation, rather than superiority' (2023, 265; see too Lippert-Rasmussen 2018, 234). Though much would depend on details that are beyond the scope of this essay, these considerations suggest that equality and solidarity or community do not naturally pull together as relational ideals; while they might complement each other, and while each might be vitally important to socialists, they refer to fundamentally different kinds of relation, and fundamentally different values. This gives us even more reason to suppose that if a modified version of LEP could be concocted on which the plus component requires egalitarian social relations as a matter of justice, and thus condemns cleanly generated exploitation as unjust and inequalitarian, it would be a theory that lies some distance from the original LEP model of Cohen and Roemer, and would most likely be better thought of as an alternative to it than as an instance of it.

## 4 Etiology Revisited?

An important part of the preceding argument rested on the idea that our settled judgements about exploitation are insensitive to etiology. This idea received support from consideration of cases like Ant and Grasshopper and Cleanly Generated Capitalism. But we might worry that case proceeded too hastily. Even if we think that those cases still involve objectionable exploitation, mightn't it be the case that etiology makes an important difference to our judgements of the severity of exploitation judgements, and mightn't luck egalitarianism be well-placed to capture that? Consider for example, the following case, which we can call Greedy Prospector. Imagine that there is an area of land which used to be the centre of extensive mining operations, and that it is now extremely dangerous. Precious metals are still obtainable in the area, but at high risk of ending up trapped in an old mining pit. A greedy prospector sets out, ignoring the ubiquitous warning signs, to make his fortune, and, predictably, ends up trapped in a mining pit and in need of rescue.

Now, if someone offered the prospector in this case a sweatshop contract in return for rescue, we would surely agree that the offer is exploitative. But we might want to insist that the offer is far less objectionable than in cases where the individual is not personally responsible for their desperate situation. And socialists in particular will be keen to insist that society's obligations to direct resources to protecting the greedy prospector from exploitation are far less stringent than in other cases. Doesn't luck egalitarianism do a remarkably good job of capturing

intuitions like these? And mightn't that mean that a (possibly modified) form of LEP should still be considered a major contender for our best all-things-considered account of the normative foundations of socialism?

This objection is certainly right to press cases like Greedy Prospector as important data points that putative accounts of socialism's normative foundations should accommodate. And it is also right to note that luck egalitarianism seems well-placed to do just that. But it's not clear that luck egalitarianism is *uniquely* well-placed to do it, and so it's not clear that this counts as a serious point in favour of LEP when compared to other models. Consider, for example, the freedom-first and relational egalitarian models (described in the next section), which attempt to ground socialism's normative claims on an understanding of freedom as nondomination on the one hand, and on a relational understanding of equality on the other. In both cases, there are resources to condemn the greedy prospector. By unilaterally imposing costs on the rest of the community in order to pursue his private ends, the greedy prospector can be argued to dominate the rest of the community, particularly if we imagine the prospector repeating such risky behaviour systematically (see, e.g., Vrousalis 2023, 88–9). Likewise, it sounds plausible to say that the greedy prospector fails to relate to his fellows as equals by taking advantage of their disposition to bail him out in order to advance his own interests. In other words, alternative accounts of socialism's normative grounds seem well-placed to condemn the greedy prospector without having to make uncomfortable concessions in cases like Cleanly Generated Capitalism. They can explain why, in particular cases, it is reasonable that some who are worse off than others as a result of responsible choice are less deserving of egalitarian concern than others (as in Greedy Prospector) without placing the choice/circumstance distinction at the very heart of egalitarian thought. It's not just because the greedy prospector is responsible for his situation; it's that his behaviour evinces objectionable relationships (dominating or disrespectful) with others (Scheffler 2003, 21–4). Though, of course, the all-thing-considered case will depend in important ways on the details of the stories told by alternative accounts, it doesn't seem that there is particularly powerful *prima facie* reason to think that LEP has a major advantage over the competition when it comes to cases like Greedy Prospector.

## 5 Implications for Contemporary Work on the Normative Foundations of Socialism

If the arguments of this paper are successful, we have reason to suppose that the LEP model of the normative foundations of socialism will struggle to provide an adequate account of socialist opposition to exploitation. However, it is worth remembering

that if the task of providing such foundations is best carried out by means of reflective equilibrium, such a result is not enough to give us an all-things-considered reason to reject LEP (still less a reason to cease further investigation of its strengths and weaknesses). Nevertheless, the arguments do provide us with a good reason to think that LEP will come with some serious theoretical costs. They therefore motivate the investigation of alternative models of socialism's normative foundations, in order to provide further material for the sorts of comparative judgements of all-things-considered plausibility that reflective equilibrium calls for. By way of conclusion, I would like to briefly outline two such models, and highlight some important areas for further research with respect to each.

The first alternative model is what we can call the *freedom-first approach* to socialism's normative foundations. According to this model, LEP is wrong to place a principle of equality at the heart of the socialist ideal. Socialism, on this line, is best seen as grounded on a commitment to the value of freedom, where freedom is understood to require nondomination or independence.<sup>20</sup> On the freedom-first approach, exploitation is taken to be objectionable for socialists because it involves domination or objectionable dependence. In a case like Cleanly Generated Capitalism, the grasshoppers are under the power of the ants in a fashion that is incompatible with respecting their freedom. And given that such judgements of dominating power are not taken to be obviated by considerations of responsibility, such judgements will be insensitive to etiological variation in precisely the way that the problem of exploitation seems to demand. Moreover, on some accounts freedom as nondomination represents a distinctly egalitarian value, and on most (if not all) accounts it is construed as a requirement of justice.<sup>21</sup> The freedom-based account thus has some potential for providing explanations and justifications of the intuitions that cases like Cleanly Generated Capitalism involve distinctly unjust and inequalitarian wrongs.

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20 This broad approach has received considerable attention in recent years, partly owing to perception of the failings of the LEP account. The broad approach comes in a republican variant (which emphasizes a republican conception of freedom as nondomination in terms of dependence on an arbitrary will) and a nonrepublican variant (which employs alternative understandings of freedom as independence, such as recognitional accounts and Kantian accounts). Examples of the former include Arnold (2016b), Bryan and Kouris (2022), Cicerchia (2022), Gourevitch (2015), Muldoon (2022), O'Shea (2020), and White (2011). (See Kandiyali (2022) and MacRae (2024) for discussion and critique.) Examples of the latter include Julius (2017), Love (2020), Vrousalis (who offers both republican and nonrepublican versions of his conception of freedom, see 2023, 46–48), and Wood (2014, 1–12, 303–16).

21 See, for example, Vrousalis (2013, 151; 2023, 6, 76) for some comments regarding the connections between nondomination and equality. For canonical statements of the tie between justice and republican freedom see Pettit (1997), and Lovett (2010).

The second alternative model retains LEP's commitment to the centrality of equality. But it recommends that we replace the luck egalitarian construal of equality with a relational egalitarian understanding of the value. The basic thought behind this model is that socialism is, at heart, a commitment to the ideal of a society of equals – of each person standing to every other as an equal, across a broad swathe of their social, political, and economic lives.<sup>22</sup> Though the ties between relational equality and socialist first-order commitments have been developed in less explicit detail in the literature than they have with regard to freedom as nondomination, a number of important contributions to the relational equality literature have taken themselves to be articulating a distinctly socialist understanding of equality, and many others have taken exploitation to be a paradigm instance of an unequalitarian social relationship of the sort that the ideal of relational equality would condemn.<sup>23</sup> The relational egalitarian account of socialism's normative foundations would thus start with the claim that exploitation – perhaps owing to the fact that it constitutes a form of objectionably unequalitarian power over others – is incompatible with the requirements of relational equality, and therefore condemned as unjust and unequal.<sup>24</sup> And, as with the freedom-first approach, these judgements of unequalitarian power inequalities do not seem to require prior judgements of individual responsibility, and so are likely to have the right sort of etiological insensitivity to capture our intuitions about exploitation cases.<sup>25</sup> With this claim in hand, arguments from the claim that justice requires relational equality to the conclusion that justice requires serious redistribution of economic resources, public provision, and public ownership could be developed to provide a series of powerful explanations and

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<sup>22</sup> For the classic contributions to the literature on relational egalitarianism see Anderson (1999), Miller (1997), Norman (1997), O'Neill (2008), Scanlon (2003), Scheffler (2003), Wolff (1998), Young (1990). For more recent discussion and development, see Lippert-Rasmussen (2018), Scanlon (2018), and Schemmel (2021).

<sup>23</sup> For relational egalitarian contributions with explicitly socialist aspirations, see Miller (1997), O'Neill (2008, 2013) and Wolff (1998, 2010). For contributions that emphasize the importance of opposition to exploitation, see Anderson (1999), Hinton (2001), O'Neill (2008), Norman (1997), and Young (1990). I attempt to develop a more explicit case for a relational egalitarian approach to socialism's normative grounds in MacRae (2024).

<sup>24</sup> The idea that unequalitarian power relations are an affront to relational equality is a core relational egalitarian claim, crucial to each of the accounts referenced in fn. 22 above. Kolodny (2014, 2023) and Viehoff (2014) also both provide detailed arguments that the ideal of relational equality involves a kind of equal control and power between individuals. Schemmel (2021) provides an extensive argument for a relational egalitarian account of the wrongness of domination.

<sup>25</sup> Indeed, insensitivity to such etiological variation is one of the main features of relational egalitarianism, and the criticism that it directs at luck egalitarianism. See in particular Anderson (1999) and Voigt (2007).

justifications of first-order socialist commitments, offering a rival model of the socialist ideal that is nevertheless distinctly egalitarian.<sup>26</sup>

Both the freedom-first approach and the relational egalitarian approach thus promise to provide accounts of socialism's normative foundations that avoid the problem of exploitation. Whether we therefore have all-things-considered reason to adopt either one over LEP (or over the other) will depend on a careful accounting of the relative advantages and disadvantages of each, as well as attempts to develop alternative varieties and modifications of the LEP model. Before concluding this essay it's worth briefly considering a final suggestion for defending luck egalitarianism's place in the normative foundations of socialism – which is some variety of pluralism or hybrid view.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps, for example, we should accept something like LEP as one part of the all-things-considered best account of the philosophical foundations of socialism, incorporating luck egalitarianism, relational egalitarianism, freedom as nondomination, and a principle of solidarity and community, for example.

Maybe a theory with this sort of shape can be produced. Does that give hope that there is still an important place for luck egalitarianism in the normative foundations of socialism? Perhaps. But first, it is worth reminding ourselves that such a pluralist or hybrid account would represent a significant departure from the LEP model of Cohen and Roemer. The central point of this paper – that LEP alone is unlikely to represent our best considered account of the normative foundations of socialism – still stands. Secondly, it is also worth asking why we might want to retain a place for something like luck egalitarianism if we've already allowed principles such as nondomination or relational equality to play a central role in our understanding of socialism's normative grounds. For example, if one allows that equality and justice require that people relate to one another as equals, then there will be a powerful reason for thinking that we should not look to the choice/circumstance distinction as the central motif of egalitarian thinking. Once one has given up that thought, then what mileage is there in continuing to insist on a place for something like luck egalitarianism in one's all-things-considered picture of the philosophical foundations of socialism – especially if one's other principles already supply one with powerful philosophical resources to condemn distributive inequality (as well as to explain why egalitarians should condemn the behaviour of people like the greedy prospector).

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<sup>26</sup> For examples of the sorts of arguments that could do this work, see MacRae (2024), McTernan et al. (2016), O'Neill (2008, 2013) and Schemmel (2021).

<sup>27</sup> For some examples of recent developments in this regard outside of the context of debates about socialism, see Axelsen and Nielsen (2024), Harting (2024), Lippert-Rasmussen (2015), Moles and Parr (2019), and Schemmel (2011a, 2011b).

Perhaps there are good answers to these questions, in which case there might still be some role for (a distant relative of) LEP to play in our best all-things-considered account of the normative foundations of socialism. However, if the arguments of this paper are right, one thing is clear. Given that LEP appears to face serious difficulty in the face of the problem of exploitation that neither the freedom-first nor the relational egalitarian account is likely to face, we have good reason to doubt that standard LEP will provide an ultimately satisfactory account of socialism's normative grounds, and plenty of reason to investigate alternative approaches.

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