

John E. Roemer (1945-present): A Short Biography

Born in 1945 in Washington D.C. between Milton and Ruth Roemer

Married to Carla Natasha Roemer having two daughters (Sara and Andrea)

Citizenship: US citizen

Residence: New York, NY

Current Position: Elizabeth S. and A. Varick Stout Professor of Political Science and
Economics in Yale University

Academic Career and Major Writings

1966	A.B. in Mathematics (<i>summa cum laude</i>) Harvard College
1969 – 1974	Mathematics Teacher, Lowell High School, and Pelton Jr High School, San Francisco, CA
1974	Ph.D. in Economics U.C. Berkeley
1974 - 1978	Assistant Professor of Economics, U.C. Davis
June - August 1978	Consultant, UNCTAD, Geneva, Switzerland
1978 - 1981	Associate Professor of Economics, U.C. Davis
1979 – 1980	Visiting Associate Professor, Yale University, NSF National Needs Fellow
1980 – 1981	J. S. Guggenheim Memorial Fellow
1981 – 2000	Professor of Economics, U.C. Davis
1981	<u>Analytical Foundations of Marxian Economic Theory</u> , Cambridge University Press.
1982	<u>A General Theory of Exploitation and Class</u> , Harvard University Press.
1984 – present	Editor for area in Marxian economics, <u>Encyclopedia of Economics and Fundamentals of Pure and Applied Economics</u>
1984 – present	Co-editor (with E.O. Wright and G. A. Cohen) of series " <u>Studies in Marxism and Social Theory</u> ," Cambridge University Press
1986	<u>Analytical Marxism</u> , Cambridge University Press.
1986	<u>Value, Exploitation, and Class</u> , Harwood Academic Publishers
1986 – present	Fellow, Econometric Society
Winter 1987	Visiting Professor, Departments of Economics & Political Science, UCLA
1987 – 1988	Acting Chair, Department of Economics, U.C. Davis
1988 – 1990	Associate Editor, <u>Economic and Politics</u>
1988 – 1996	Associate Editor, <u>Journal of Economic Perspectives</u>
1988 – 1997	Associate Editor, <u>Journal of Economic Literature</u>
1988 – 2000	Director, Program on Economy, Justice & Society, U.C. Davis
1988	<u>Free To Lose: An Introduction to Marxist Economic Philosophy</u> , Harvard University Press.
1991-present	Executive Board, <u>Society for Social Choice and Welfare</u>
1991	(with J. Elster) <u>Interpersonal Comparisons of Well-Being</u>

Cambridge University Press
 1992-present Associate Editor, Review of Economic Design
 1993 German Bernacer Lectures, University of Alicante, Spain
 1993 (with D. Copp and J. Hampton) The Idea of Democracy
 Cambridge University Press
 1993 (with P. Bardhan) Market Socialism: The Current Debate.
 Oxford University Press
 Fall 1994 Visiting professor of economics, Harvard University
 1994 A Future for Socialism Harvard University Press
 1994 Egalitarian Perspectives, Cambridge University Press
 1995-1997 Executive Board, American Economic Association
 1996 Theories of Distributive Justice, Harvard University Press
 1996 (with Erik O. Wright) Equal Shares, London: Verso
 1997 Property relations, incentives, and welfare, Macmillan
 1997 – present Associate Editor, Journal of Ethics
 1998-1999 Fellow, Russell Sage Foundation
 1998 Equality of Opportunity, Harvard University Press
 2000- present Elizabeth S. and A. Varick Stout Professor of Political Science
 and Economics, Yale University
 2000 Arrow Lecture, Society for Social Choice and Welfare
 2001 Political Competition, Harvard University Press
 2003 Graz-Schumpeter Lecture, University of Graz

I will not attempt to provide a thorough biography of Professor John Roemer. We will briefly sketch his career and academic contributions based upon three sources: (1) his CV (attached); (2) the John Roemer section in *A Biographical Dictionary of Dissenting Economists* edited by P. Arestis and M. Sawyer; and finally (3) my own reading of his works and memories from my personal conversations with him for the last twelve years.

John Roemer is currently Professor of Political Science and Economics in Yale University. He was born in Washington D.C. in 1945, and graduated from Harvard College in 1966 with a degree in mathematics. In 1974 he was awarded the Ph.D. degree in economics at the University of California at Berkeley and began teaching at the University of California at Davis thereafter. In 1986, Roemer was elected Fellow of the Econometric Society, and between 1998 and 1999, he became Russell Sage Foundation Fellow. Since 2000, he has been in the Yale University as Elizabeth S. and A. Varick Stout Professor of Political Science and Economics.

Professor Roemer's attitude towards science and the use of mathematics in it is well summarized in the following citation.

“The use of mathematical techniques can clarify relationships in an unambiguous way; without these techniques, only intuition can be a guide. But the intuitions of the two people may contradict each other: When both are forced to state their beliefs in a common (mathematical) language, there is an objective standard for deciding which is correct...A model is necessarily one schematic image of a theory, and one must not be so myopic as to believe other schematic images cannot exist. Nevertheless, this is not a reason not to use mathematics in trying to understand a theory.... No model can ever hope to capture fully the theory of historical materialism. It is as if a theory is an object in an infinite-dimensional space, and a model gives us a projection of the object onto a small subspace. Different models produce different projections; with more models, more projections, we get a more accurate feeling for the implications and the limits of the theory, but we can never capture every dimension of the theory from its models. With sufficient modeling, however, we may come to feel that we have exhausted the interesting content of the theory, and so, for all practical purposes, it is understood.”¹

In his early academic career Professor Roemer worked on classical Marxian questions on capitalism and capitalist exploitation, building on a general equilibrium

¹ John Roemer, 1979, *Analytical Foundations of Marxian Economics*, Cambridge University

model of a capitalist economy. Roemer's work in Marxian economics during this period is materialized in a book, *Analytical Foundations of Marxian Economics*. In that book, Roemer firmly advocated the microfoundations approach in Marxian social science.

During 1979-80, while Professor Roemer held a Guggenheim fellowship at Yale University, he completed a book which widened the repertoire of Marxian economics considerably, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*. From this book, Roemer began to extend his analysis from that of capitalist economies to that of socialist ones. As is clearly stated in the introduction, the book was motivated by his interest in understanding the development of class society in socialist countries. Amartya Sen, in his praise for the book, describes it as 'delightfully controversial and deeply innovative.'

There are many novel models and innovative arguments in the book; I will mention only two. First, Roemer presents a model which predates the currently popular models of imperfect capital markets (such as those of Aghion and Bolton, Banerjee and Newman, and Piketty), and shows that class emerges from utility maximizing economic activity of rational agents under the constraints that they face (in the world of imperfect capital markets). He derives five classes from the model -- pure capitalist, semi-capitalist, independent artisan, semi-proletarian, and proletarian -- and proves a theorem which links the class position and the exploitation status of individual agents (the Class-Exploitation Correspondence Principle). Second, Roemer proposes a general theory of exploitation, using the concept of the core from cooperative game theory, in which feudal, capitalist and socialist exploitation emerges as special cases. In this model, the theory of exploitation and class is linked with neither the labor theory of value nor the presence of capitalist control in the labor process. Thus in contrast to the views of the 'labor process school' (deriving from the Harry Braverman's seminal book, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, and culminated in the works of Stephen Marglin and Samuel Bowles), Roemer propounded a theory of capitalism in which the emergence of exploitation and class are based primarily on 'property relations.' The difference between these two views is, I would say, *not just theoretical*. Political and practical visions these two theories of capitalism draw are dramatically different.

After reflecting deeply on the ethical roots of the concept of exploitation from 1981, Roemer wrote in 1985 an article, 'Should Marxists be interested in exploitation?'

where he argued that exploitation was a surrogate for an interest in equality of the asset ownership while it is an unreliable statistic of inequality. From this work, John Roemer moved significantly away from the unequal exchange of labor as a concept of fundamental interest, and began studying inequality in the ownership of assets to answer the following question: what kind of equality should one advocate as an ideal?

Another question that Roemer reflected on around this time is the following: The Marxian prescription for resolving the problems of capitalism was to dissolve private property in the alienable means of production, and replace it with public ownership. There is, however, no accepted definition of public ownership among social scientists. What kind of public ownership should one defend to overcome the problems of capitalism? What is the democratic mechanism of achieving this goal? Can democracy engender equality in income and wealth, as many leftist have hoped and many conservatives have feared?

Thus, since 1987, Roemer's work has concentrated on three interrelated issues: (1) theories of distributive justice; (2) theories of democratic public ownership; and (3) theories of political economy in democracies.

Regarding the issues of distributive justice, Roemer proposed an idea of equality of opportunity, which is an outcome of his serious intellectual confrontation with the liberal democratic ideas of Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls. Professor Roemer's conception of equality of opportunity is well expounded in his two books: *Theories of Distributive Justice* and *Equality of Opportunity*. In these books, Roemer advocates a view that society should indemnify each individual against poor outcomes that are the consequences of causes beyond his/her control but *not* against outcomes that he or she is responsible for.

In relation to the issues on democratic public ownership, Roemer proposed, with the collaboration of Pranab Bardhan, Joaquim Silvestre and Ignacio Ortuno-Ortin, a model of democratic market socialism which significantly expands and brings a new life to Oskar Lange's pioneering paper of 1938. Roemer's academic contributions on this subject are well summarized in two books, *A Future for Socialism* and *Market Socialism: The Current Debate*. In these books Roemer defines democratic market socialism as an economy in which (1) all private goods are distributed via markets; (2) firms are profit

maximizing and publicly owned (meaning profits are distributed to citizens in a manner that is democratically decided upon); (3) the pattern and the level of investment are decided upon democratically, perhaps through the competition of political parties; and (4) the government uses price, quantity, and tax instruments to implement the desired pattern of investment.

Regarding the theories of democratic political economy, Roemer invented an innovative equilibrium concept, the Party Unanimity Nash Equilibrium (PUNE), which is the first equilibrium concept in the history of analytical political economy that enables researchers to study multi-dimensional politics in a 'meaningful' way. Before Roemer introduced the PUNE concept, students of political economy were forced to play with the Downsian equilibrium (because that was the only available equilibrium concept), the existence of which cannot be extended into a multi-dimensional policy space. Roemer's book, *Political Competition*, just shows how substantial his contributions in this field are. I am one of those lucky people who were able to collaborate with John Roemer in this field.

In sum, over the last thirty years Professor Roemer has attempted to formulate rigorous definitions of class, exploitation, public ownership, market socialism, equality of opportunity, and democratic political economy. By doing so, he broadened his perspective (and the perspectives of others) from that of economists to those of philosophers and political scientists. He opened doors to almost every field of social science, and gave new garbs to many of its salient issues. John Roemer is one of few contemporary social scientists who are equally at home in economics, philosophy and political science.

Social scientists do not have to agree with Professor John Roemer in every respect. Indeed John Roemer's work has been as much controversial as it was innovative. Nevertheless, John Roemer has always welcomed different opinion, and different modeling that may at times overturn his results. "With sufficient modeling, however, we may come to feel that we have exhausted the interesting content of the theory, and so, for all practical purposes, it is understood."