

## G. A. Cohen Showed Why We Should All Be Socialists

Right before he died, Marxist philosopher G. A. Cohen wrote a short book called *Why Not Socialism?* It's a perfect introduction to the case for moving beyond a capitalist economy.



G. A. Cohen's *Why Not Socialism?* offers a simple and powerful argument against capitalism. (Oxford University)

At the beginning of his short book [\*Why Not Socialism?\*](#), G.A. Cohen asks the reader to think about a group of friends going on a camping trip together. He doesn't describe anything out of the ordinary. The friends find a site and set up a tent. Some of them fish, some of them cook, they all go on hikes, and so on.

What Cohen wants the reader to notice is that the way this trip is run looks a lot like how socialists think society should be run. The pots and pans and fishing poles and soccer balls, for example, are treated as collective property — even if they belong to individual campers. When the fish are caught and cooked, everyone gets to partake equally of the result of the collective effort, free of charge. Cohen's hypothetical campers act this way not because of anything especially noble about them, but because this is how *any* group of friends would act on a camping trip.

To make the point more sharply, he invites us to imagine a far less normal camping trip — one that's run according to the principles of a capitalist market economy. One of the campers (Sylvia) discovers an apple tree. When she comes back to tell the others, they're excited that they'll all be able to enjoy apple sauces, apple pie, and

apple strudel. Certainly they can, Sylvia confirms — “provided, of course . . . that you reduce my labor burden, and/or provide me with more room in the tent, and/or with more bacon at breakfast.”

Another camper, Harry, is very good at fishing, and so in exchange for his services he demands that he be allowed to dine exclusively on perch instead of the mixture of perch and catfish everyone else is eating. Another, Morgan, lays claim to a pond with especially good fish because he claims that his grandfather dug and stocked it with those fish on another camping trip decades ago.

No normal person, Cohen notes, would tolerate such behavior. They would insist on what he calls a “socialist way of life.” Why, then, shouldn’t we want to organize an entire economy around the same principles?

Many defenders of capitalism would insist that, however obnoxious or unacceptable it would be to treat your friends this way, people still have a right to assert private property claims — including claims to private property in the means of production — and that it would be unacceptably authoritarian for a future socialist society to abridge such rights. Cohen doesn’t spend any time in *Why Not Socialism?* on this defense, perhaps because he addresses it at length in two of his other books, [\*Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality\*](#) and [\*History, Labour, and Freedom\*](#).

Instead, he devotes the later chapters of *Why Not Socialism?* to objections that even some progressives might have about whether socialist principles can scale up from a camping trip to an entire economy. Is what’s possible among a small group of friends really possible for a whole society? What about [economic calculation problems](#)? What about [human nature](#)?

Cohen takes these challenges seriously, but cautions against premature defeatism. He admits that it’s possible that the closest we’ll get to the fully marketless economic planning modeled by the camping trip on a society-wide scale is some sort of [market socialism](#) — although he thinks it’s premature to rule out the possibility of going further than that.

Either way, Cohen’s view is that the ideal is one worth striving for. Even if we don’t get all the way there, a society that more closely approximates the way of life found on the camping trip would be better than one further from it.

## **How Libertarians Have Tried to Respond**

*Why Not Socialism?* was published in 2009, the year Cohen died. Five years later, libertarian philosopher Jason Brennan came out with a critique entitled [\*Why Not Capitalism?\*](#)

In it Brennan argues that instead of looking at the flaws of actually existing socialism

and those of actually existing capitalism, Cohen was weighing a socialist ideal against the warts-and-all version of capitalism. Such a lopsided comparison, he thinks, proves nothing.

Brennan illustrates the point by discussing the animated Disney show *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* (not to be confused with the older variety show *The Mickey Mouse Club*). In a parody of Cohen's camping trip chapter, Brennan describes the show as it actually is — everyone seems to be friends with everyone else and there doesn't seem to be any poverty or serious social distress, but it looks like a regular market economy. Minnie Mouse owns a factory and store for hair bows called the Bowtique, Clarabelle Cow is a reasonably successful entrepreneur (she owns both a sundries store called the Moo Mart and a Moo Muffin factory), and Donald Duck and Willie the Giant both own their own farms.

Brennan then asks the reader to imagine a hypothetical version of the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse Village where some of the villagers started doing what Stalinist regimes did in the name of socialism. Donald forcibly collectivizes all farmland like Stalin did in 1929, Clarabelle Cow starts a secret police force, and so on. Obviously, that would be horrible!

If you don't think this hypothetical proves anything about capitalism and socialism, Brennan writes, you shouldn't think Cohen's camping trip argument does either. In both cases, the problem is that like isn't being compared to like. And Brennan further argues that, even as an ideal, capitalism is better than socialism because in a laissez-faire capitalist world, anyone who wanted to secede and form a commune with their own preferred rules could do so.

There are three problems with Brennan's argument. First, *he* is not comparing like to like in his attempt to satirize Cohen. After all, Cohen isn't describing some idealized fantasy of a camping trip; he's describing the kind of camping trip that untold numbers of people go on every year. *They all work the way Cohen describes*. The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse Village is a trippy sci-fi fantasy of animals interacting in a half-imagined society, one where it's unclear whether a state exists or what sorts of labor laws or regulations it potentially enforces. To compare like to like, Brennan would have had to find a mundane experience that many readers have had, or at least are very familiar with, where a "capitalist way of life" would be obviously preferable.

Second, Cohen isn't contrasting the small-scale implementation of socialist ideals with the worst things that have been done in the name of capitalism. Sylvia's insistence on her property rights stops the other campers from getting apple strudel — she isn't denying any of them life-saving medications because they can't afford to pay. No one hires other campers to stack firewood for them and then hires Pinkertons to beat or kill the firewood stackers when they go on strike. Cohen doesn't come up with a camping trip version of the British East India company or the enclosures that drove peasants off their land and made them desperate enough to take jobs in early factories or Adolf Hitler's declaration of emergency powers to protect Germany from

the threat of left-wing revolution.

Instead, all of Cohen's examples are examples of people asserting exactly the kinds of economic rights that defenders of capitalism are eager to endorse — the kind that everyone would have in Brennan's libertarian ideal of capitalism! Morgan's grandfather passed on his property to his descendants, Sylvia is asserting her property rights in the means of apple strudel production as the initial discoverer of a piece of unowned property, and the other two are simply trying to bargain for the best deal they can get in a free market.

If Brennan wanted to seriously engage with Cohen's argument, he'd have to explain why, if it's not okay to act this way on a camping trip, it wouldn't even be *desirable* to try to figure out a different way to organize a society.

## Cohen's Conclusions

Cohen thinks that what's wrong with introducing a "capitalist way of life" into a camping trip — and with it serving as the guiding principle for an economy — is that capitalism fails to live up to an ideal that its defenders often tout: equality of opportunity. In each case, some people are doing worse than others due to factors outside their control — not having seen the apple tree first, not having a grandfather who bequeathed the particularly good fishing pond, or just not being lucky enough to have been born with the same skills as their friends.

Similarly, Cohen thinks, no one deserves a worse life just because they didn't grow up in a rich family or they weren't born with the skills that allow some to climb up the social ladder. He contrasts "bourgeois equality of opportunity," meaning that there are no formal impediments to anyone succeeding (for example, racial discrimination) and even "left-liberal equality of opportunity," which attempts to go beyond bourgeois equality of opportunity with programs like Head Start that compensate for certain social disadvantages, with "socialist equality of opportunity" — the principle that no one should have a worse life due to factors outside of their control.

If different people, for example, want to make different decisions about how many hours to work and how much leisure to enjoy, it's not unjust to reward more industrious choices with greater consumption. But no one should have a worse life because of who their parents were or how well they do on tests. Cohen supplements this with a socialist principle of community: if you recognize other people as part of your community, you'll try to make sure they don't suffer too much even from bad choices they make of their own free will.

I'd argue Cohen's list of principles is somewhat incomplete. Historically, socialists have, for very good reasons, emphasized [equality of power](#) (although, to be fair, Cohen writes eloquently [elsewhere](#) about the unfreedom that workers suffer under

capitalism).

I also wish he'd read about other models of what socialism could look like. As an achievable halfway house between capitalism and completely marketless, moneyless camping-trip-style socialism, Cohen discusses John Roemer's scheme under which every citizen would be awarded equal stock ownership, but Cohen doesn't seem to be aware of, for example, the slightly more radical conception of market socialism advanced by [David Schweickart](#). I wish he had, because in implementing democratic control at the workplace, Schweickart's conception comes closer to Cohen's ideal while still seeming realistic in the short term.

Despite these minor defects, *Why Not Socialism?* is an excellent introduction to socialist ideals. The form of presentation is intuitive and even deceptively simple, while the underlying arguments are careful and sophisticated. You can finish it in an hour, and Cohen's points will linger in your head for years. Read it.