



G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?*

Why Not Socialism? by G. A. Cohen,

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Ethics, Vol. 120, No. 2 (January 2010), pp. 391-395

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/651141>

Accessed: 18/11/2012 08:08

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“Sentences, Belief and Logical Omniscience; or, What Does Deduction Tell Us?” *Review of Symbolic Logic* 1:459–76).

As for the second item, let me start by observing that in the past Binmore has equated Rawls’s defense of the maximin principle to an attempt to overthrow orthodox decision theory. As I mentioned above, he rehearses this line of argument in chapter 3, where he shows that a maximally risk-averse decision maker (an agent who only differentiates between receiving nothing and receiving anything) is indifferent between prospects with different minima. He goes on to speculate that the idea may seem “popular with some authors” (53) because the maximin strategy is the strategy by von Neumann and Morgenstern’s theory in two-person zero-sum games. While it may be possible to argue that there isn’t much sense in making decisions as if we were constantly playing a zero-sum game with nature in which nature were constantly trying to harm us as much as possible, the leap to discrediting Rawls’s use of the maximin criterion under the veil of ignorance seems now unjustified in light of what Binmore concedes in a footnote (52 n. 8): “Rawls’s intuition in favor of the maximin criterion is perhaps better captured by [the] theory of decisions under complete ignorance.” The theory of decisions under complete ignorance is not von Neumann and Morgenstern’s utility theory, which only covers decision under risk. But then, if Rawls’s intuition has to be evaluated within a theory of decisions under complete ignorance, the conclusion that Rawls is overthrowing orthodox decision theory loses its teeth since the original position lies in a large world. The decision maker is not able to attach definite probabilities to the possible outcomes of her decision, and adopting the maximin criterion is not tantamount to unceremoniously getting rid of orthodox Bayesian decision theory. In fact, Binmore’s criticism of the maximin rule as a criterion for decisions under ignorance in section 9.1 only makes use of the argument that the extreme risk aversion and conservativeness implied by the criterion make it unfit as a general decision rule, but since it does not consider the specific circumstances of the original position, the argument does not rule out that the maximin criterion could be the reasonable choice for decisions under a veil of ignorance.

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Cohen, G. A. *Why Not Socialism?*

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009. Pp. 83. \$14.95 (cloth).

If there had been a prize for the best very short book on political philosophy published in the last two hundred years, it should have been won by *The Communist Manifesto*. If there were a prize for the best very short book on political philosophy published in the last twenty years, an interesting competitor would be *Why Not Socialism?* It presents with remarkable clarity a case that needs to be heard and evaluated. It offers more for reflection than many books three or four times its length. And its virtues make us the sadder to remember that this

will be the last work that we shall have from G. A. Cohen, along with his much longer book *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Everything that Cohen wrote is rewarding to read. He is likely to remain most famous for his first book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972). But the same admirable lucidity and capacity for constructing searching arguments are as evident in his final writings as in his first. Yet, as with *The Communist Manifesto*, the questions that *Why Not Socialism?* provokes are as important as the theses that it defends. What are those theses? Cohen defines socialism by proposing two sets of principles, principles that require equality of opportunity and principles designed to sustain community. So far as opportunity is concerned, Cohen is a radical egalitarian. We need to get rid of not only those inequalities that arise from "socially constructed status restrictions" (15), such as those imposed by the hierarchies of feudal societies and those grounded in prejudice against certain groups, but also those that arise from disadvantages of birth or of upbringing or of education and in addition those that derive from "differences in natural and social capacities and powers" (18). The only tolerable income differences under socialist equality of opportunity would "reflect nothing but different individual preferences, including income/leisure preferences" (18). For the only inequalities consistent with genuine equality of opportunity arise from free choices that happen to turn out badly for those who made them. Yet even such inequalities are unacceptable from a socialist standpoint because to tolerate them would be incompatible with the realization of the ideal of community.

That ideal requires "that people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another" (34–35). Such caring precludes the acceptance of any large inequality because the consequent differences between one person and another in respect of hardships and challenges will be a barrier to communal relationships between them. A second requirement is imposed by the principle "according to which I serve you not because of what I can get in return by doing so but because you need or want my service" (39). Such communal reciprocity is to be contrasted with market reciprocity "since the market motivates productive contribution not on the basis of commitment to one's fellow human beings and a desire to serve them while being served by them, but on the basis of cash reward" (32).

There are types of situations, Cohen suggests, in which we all of us endorse these principles. His example is that of a camping trip, where the campers "cooperate within a common concern that, so far as possible, everybody has a roughly similar opportunity to flourish, and also to relax, on condition that she contributes, appropriately to her capacity, to the flourishing and relaxing of others" (4–5). What Cohen hoped to achieve by writing this book was to convince his readers that, even when they are not on principle-informed camping trips, they should accept these same principles for the ordering of their social lives. He therefore poses two questions. Is the socialist ideal, so understood, desirable? And is it feasible? As to its desirability, Cohen considers two objections. The first is that on such camping trips the right of individuals to make their own choices, whenever those choices are inequality engendering, is not honored. To this he replies that only some limited types of choice are constrained on such occasions

and that anyway in a market society a great many of our choices are constrained, often in ways and to an extent of which we are unaware. A second objection is that, although socialist values may be attractive among a group of friends on a camping trip, they are inappropriate in the varying and complex relationships of a large-scale society. To which Cohen's reply is that he takes it that "all people of goodwill" would be happy with a state of affairs in which "I treat everyone with whom I have any exchange or other form of contact as someone towards whom I have the reciprocating attitude that is characteristic of friendship. . . . It is surely a welcome thing when more rather than less community is present in society" (51–52).

What then about the feasibility of socialism? Cohen considers two ways in which something approaching the egalitarian and communal ideals that he values might be achieved. Joseph Caren in his *Equality, Moral Incentives, and the Market* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) described an economy in which the capitalist market operates just as it does at present, but inequalities in income and wealth are prevented by a tax rate system that "effects a fully egalitarian post tax distribution of income" (64). And more than one proponent of market socialism has argued for the possibilities of an economy in which different enterprises compete in a market, but each enterprise either is owned and controlled by those who work in it or is publicly owned (68). Among proponents of market socialism, it is John Roemer (*A Future for Socialism* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994]) to whose work Cohen pays particular attention.

One difficulty with Carens's scheme, as Cohen sees it, is that it invites us to envisage something difficult to envisage, a capitalist society whose members, by their acceptance of equalizing taxation, willingly give expression to a collective non-self-interested choice. And this point against Carens could be made more strongly than Cohen makes it. In a Carensian economy, individuals in their economic activity will act as self-interested competitors would act, while in their political decisions the same individuals will act as altruistic egalitarians would act. How this might become possible is puzzling. So Cohen turns to the case for some type of market socialism.

The problem with any version of market socialism is that its market exchanges will both generate inequalities incompatible with the socialist ideal and make it difficult to sustain "the value of community" (75). Cohen therefore concludes that, although either a Carensian economy or some version of market socialism would be greatly preferable to capitalism as it now is, we do not as yet know how to make the transition from an economy in which greed and fear have the functions that they now do, and in which the forms of market exchange promote inequalities and damage community, as they now do, to a nationwide economy that will embody the procedures and ethos of the camping trip that Cohen described. But Cohen insists that we do not know "that we will never know how to do these things" (70). And, although the obstacles of "entrenched human power and individual human selfishness" are serious, "they are not reason to disparage the ideal itself" (80).

A great many people should be encouraged to read Cohen's little book, among them at one extreme those students and young workers whose political education is just beginning and at the other the owners of those mindless mouths

of the American Right for whom 'Socialism' has been reduced to a term of abuse. My hope is, however, that those who read it and are attracted by its arguments will be provoked to go beyond it. For it is, for all its clarity, its persuasive argument, and its charm, a very odd book for someone strongly influenced by Marx to have written. Begin not with Marx himself but with the G. A. Cohen who wrote *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. In that book he took himself to be following Marx when he endorsed a "broad generalization" to the effect that "good productive forces do not yield to less good ones, in the normal run of things. . . . Yet productive forces are frequently replaced by better ones" (154). A key question, therefore, about any possible transition from capitalism to socialism would concern whether future socialist economies can be expected to be more productive than the capitalism of the present is. And in that book Cohen had posed the question of the costs to and benefits for working-class people of bringing about a socialist revolution, concluding that only when capitalist "crisis is bad enough" will "the dangers of embarking on a socialist revolution become comparatively tolerable" (244–45).

Such considerations, which are relevant to any attempt to answer the question "Why not socialism?" are ignored in *Why Not Socialism?* Instead, Cohen seems to suggest that we begin by considering and debating socialism as an abstract ideal and only then proceed to ask what would have to be changed in our social and economic order if we were to achieve that ideal, taking it for granted throughout that his readers—or at least a very large number of us—are already the kind of people who, once we had understood the ideal and how to achieve it, would be moved to bring it about. Marx had a name for those who proceeded thus: 'Utopian socialists'. And it was Marx's view that there is no direct path from Utopian socialism to socialism. Why not? Because abstract ideals are always insufficient by themselves to move human beings to systematic political and economic action. It is only insofar as we become able to relate such ideals to the ends for which we now recurrently struggle in our everyday lives within the social and economic structures of advanced capitalism that we begin to see the point of and to be moved by those ideals. And here something else is missing from Cohen's argument.

What working people care fiercely about in their everyday lives generally includes their families first and foremost, the quality of life in their neighborhood, the wages and conditions of work in their particular workplace, and whatever is salient to their leisure, such as identification with some football or baseball or cricket team. These are local concerns and attachments, and they are the concerns and attachments of those who are nowadays often enough small and vulnerable property owners, who own so little that they prize what they own all the more. Of these dimensions to the lives of working people and of their importance for political and economic motivation, there is no sense at all in Cohen's account. And in this respect he resembles all too many of his Utopian socialist predecessors. They never learned what G. K. Chesterton and the distributists understood very well, that the only viable politics of the exploited nowadays is one that enables them to defend what they rightly value in the present against the threats of capitalism and the modern state and, in the course of defending it, to discover how much more needs to be changed, if they are

to be liberated from exploitation and repression. What kind of politics would that be here and now?

Even to begin to answer that question by turning to issues concerning the wages and the housing needed to sustain family life or the type of trade union organization needed to defend wages and working conditions or the politics needed to secure adequate housing would take us surprisingly far away from the text of *Why Not Socialism?* For oddest of all is its silence about the politics of the present. Yet any ideal able to provide us with a vision of our common good that is a genuine alternative to the globalizing capitalism of advanced modernity must be expressible in and through practices of resistance to capitalism and the state that are more than negative, piecemeal, and ad hoc resistances. An ideal that cannot be so expressed is irrelevant.

To this the reply may be: "you are asking too much from a short book." What more could Cohen have been expected to achieve in eighty-two small pages than he did achieve? But to this it must be said that what Cohen in fact succeeded in showing us is that the question "Why not socialism?" may be posed but cannot be answered in eighty-two pages. And that too is a lesson worth learning.

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Luper, Steven. *The Philosophy of Death*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Pp. 253. \$90.00 (cloth); \$28.99 (paper).

The Philosophy of Death is a comprehensive examination of important death-related questions in metaphysics, axiology, and the normative ethics of behavior, such as: what is it to be alive and to die? Can death be bad for the one who dies, and can events occurring after her death harm her? What makes killing wrong? It also contains extended discussions of related practical questions, such as: by what criteria can we determine that someone has died? Are euthanasia and abortion morally permissible?

Here are some of the most important claims Luper defends. (i) For a thing to be alive is for it to contain "durable replicators" that provide the capacity for the thing to maintain itself. (ii) Conversely, to die is for that capacity to be destroyed. (iii) Death is bad for someone iff (if and only if) it makes her life worse than it would have otherwise been. (iv) When death is bad for someone, it makes that person worse off either at times before she died or at the time of death. (v) Events occurring after someone dies can harm her in the same way death itself does: by frustrating the interests she had when she was alive. (vi) Killing a competent individual is wrong iff she did not make an informed choice to be killed; killing an incompetent individual is wrong iff it harms her.

Concerning the more practical questions, Luper argues that euthanasia and suicide are, at least sometimes, morally permissible. In the case of voluntary