

Review of Cohen, G. A. "Why Not Socialism?"

Summary

Cohen's book uses a simple title: "Why Not Socialism?", which is intriguing and clearly states his position on socialism. Here, Cohen seeks to present a case for socialism by exploring its desirability, feasibility, and the next best alternative. He does so using a thought experiment of the Camping Trip (*trip*).

Cohen based the *trip* on two socialist principles. The first is an egalitarian principle which is equal opportunities and accepting inequalities of outcome. The second is the principle of community, where although we accept inequalities of outcome, the idea of community prevents inequalities from being too wide. Cohen suggests that there is no hierarchy in a *trip*, and people will share privately owned resources collectively for the span of the *trip*. He then offers an alternative market-based trip (the capitalist way) and declares that most people would be drawn to the socialist way of camping.

Next, Cohen discusses if the socialism ideal is desirable, feasible and proposes an alternative form of socialism, that is market socialism, which I will focus on in the reflection. Cohen concludes by stating a desire to see the community ideals extended to every part of our economy and life. He acknowledges that we humans still have not figured out how to do that and should continue trying.

Critical reflection

There are several fallacies with Cohen's *trip*. He first claims that there is no hierarchy, but overlooks the fact that in a *trip*, there are hierarchies, such as leaders or free riders. Next, private property is shared among the collective for the *trip*. However, the collectivism only lasts for the duration of the *trip*. Moreover, the fact remains that my private property belongs to me and I can withhold its usage by the collective at any time. This sets up a false premise that unlike what Cohen claims, socialism cannot fully thrive even in a restricted setting.

Next, Cohen discusses desirability and feasibility. While I agree with Cohen that it is desirable to have the *trip* ethos applied to society (equality and community), I argue that we should not separate desirability and feasibility. Desires will only continue to exist in theory, if there is no way for said desires to be integrated into societies. Cohen further claims that feasibility is not from where we are currently but assuming we have the power to implement it. However, feasibility means being *realistic* which implies starting from our present state, but Cohen ignores that and states an *idealistic* assumption.

While Cohen and I differ in our views on market socialism, we share the same belief in a fairer and more egalitarian society. Since we do not know how to get to market socialism from where we are, I propose having markets with socialist characteristics. I envision such a market as a capitalist market with policies to uplift the poorest and least privileged, by trying to create equal opportunities and accepting inequalities of outcome. The difference is that unlike market socialism, which is "just 1 step below" socialism as Cohen states, a market with socialist characteristics is "just 1 step forward" from where we are presently at, thereby increasing its feasibility.

To conclude, Cohen's insubstantial reasoning of the *trip* weakens the credibility of socialism to be implemented on a wider societal scale. There is currently no viable path towards

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socialism. Although the *trip* appeals to our innermost desire of an ideal society, it applies only to a utopian world. The first step towards a society with stronger egalitarian and community ideals begins with treating others equally, with respect, and this fosters the community that socialists yearn for.

(Word Count: 595)

References

1. Cohen, G. A. (2001). Why Not Socialism?. In E. Broadbent (Ed.), Democratic Equality: What Went Wrong? (pp. 58-78). University of Toronto Press.