

New Basketball Shorts for Socialism: A Defense of *Why Not Socialism?*

In *Why Not Socialism?* G.A. Cohen makes an intuitive argument for socialism appealing to the ideals of community and equality. He uses a continued example of a camping trip, and plays with the idea of implementing this socialist-esque construct into the scale of our society. Cohen makes the point that even if society does not yet know how to implement socialism as our economic organization, it is an appealing ideal on which we should not give up (81). In response to this book, Jason Brennan wrote *Why Not Capitalism?* in which he ultimately argues that Cohen commits a logical fallacy that invalidates his argument: his comparison of perfect socialism to imperfect capitalism does not imply socialism is more desirable than capitalism. In this paper, I argue that Brennan's objection is incorrect because Cohen's idealized socialism is derived from the governing attitudes of socialism as opposed to just being "perfect socialism" and therefore, Cohen's book does provide good reason to consider socialism an ideal even if implementing it is not currently feasible.

I will begin by reconstructing Brennan's objection to Cohen after summarizing Cohen's argument. Then I will argue why Brennan's objection (his claim that Cohen makes a logical fallacy) is incorrect, and I will argue for the validity of Cohen's line of reasoning for socialism's desirability due to the necessary association of socialism with certain ideal principles, which I will explain. I will follow this by briefly discussing what Brennan has to say about this necessary association of socialism with certain ideal principles. Then I will discuss the history of capitalist regimes as a foreseeable counterargument to my reasoning, to which I will respond by using Cohen's concession that we need not know how to implement socialism for it to be desirable.

I will now reconstruct Brennan's objection to Cohen's defense of socialism by summarizing Cohen's argument and then describing why Brennan thinks it fails. Cohen's

“socialist” camping trip involves people on vacation, happily taking on roles to benefit the collective. They work without expecting individual reward and understand their duties under the principles of communal reciprocity and equality. According to Cohen, this is preferable to a “capitalist” camping trip in which people compete, assert private property rights over food and equipment, and bargain for every resource (4).

Brennan disagrees that Cohen’s camping example is evidence of socialism’s intrinsic desirability over capitalism. In *Why Not Capitalism?* he introduces a satirical thought experiment of the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse Village (to parody Cohen’s camping trips), where every character happily partakes in a certain role, and even with private ownership of the means of the production, they realize principles of voluntary community, beneficence, mutual respect, and other ideal social attitudes (37). This example, according to Brennan, shows that any economic distribution with ideal beings will be desirable, and the attraction of the camping trip is due to the very fact that it is a hyper-idealized thought experiment, not because of anything that can be distinctly attributed to socialism. He argues that since Mickey Mouse and his friends can live friendly, beneficent, lives where they happily take on roles and consider their contributions as duties to help their neighbors, it is possible to create a society that makes capitalism seem desirable. As a result, Cohen’s comparison of the socialist camping trip to the capitalist one is actually a comparison of idealized socialism to realistic capitalism. In other words, a socialist society with perfectly unselfish people is obviously going to be preferable to a capitalist society with real, imperfect people, so Cohen’s conclusion that socialism is inherently more desirable does not validly follow from his premises.

In response to Brennan, I argue that Cohen’s comparison of the socialist versus capitalist camping trips is not an unfair comparison because he uses inherent qualities of socialism and

capitalism to determine people's attitudes in the respective examples.<sup>1</sup> The principles realized by the camping trip example are the very principles that govern individual attitudes in a socialist society. These attitudes are necessary for socialism and distinct from those that motivate individuals under capitalism due to the contrasting nature of these economic systems. It is easy to think of the socialist camping trip as an exaggerated ideal from the perspective of economic actors like us whose selfishness perpetuates and is encouraged by capitalism, but this argument by Brennan, in a way, supports Cohen's point. The camping trip seems ideal because the attitudes socialism requires and reinforces are actually ideal, which is part of Cohen's reasoning in favor of socialism's desirability. What Brennan considers "real-life capitalism" or capitalism with "imperfect beings" is simply capitalism with people motivated by the necessary attitudes that capitalism demands. Although Brennan claims that, in his juxtaposition of the camping trips, Cohen makes a convenient comparison of perfect socialism to imperfect capitalism, Cohen is really comparing the epitome of socialism to the epitome of capitalism.

It remains to show how socialism is necessarily related to the attitudes of communal reciprocity, mutual respect, and equality, and why this is a distinction from capitalism. It is not a coincidence that in the socialist camping trip, people are motivated by the sense of community. This is a defining quality of socialism in principle, because socialism is based on the idea of collective ownership over the means of production. Without private property, there are no rewards for selfishness, and every contribution goes towards the community. As a result, the only incentive people have to work is to benefit the community. It would be illogical to try to gain more money through insider trading, exploiting workers, or committing crimes like tax fraud

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<sup>1</sup> An easy way to see why Cohen's camping trip example is not an ideal of unrealistically unselfish humans is the fact that people do go on camping trips like this, in which ownership over means of production is shared and everyone is motivated by community reciprocity. As a matter of fact, there are actually other real-life instances of socialist systems that look like this ideal, such as kibbutzim in Israel. Yet I argue that this is not necessary for Cohen's argument to still be valid.

because people simply would not gain any individual benefit. Equality and mutual respect are necessarily attached to socialism (at least socialism as it is supposed to function) because workers are forced to receive the same benefits as the rest of their community, and they work to support other people just as much as they are supporting themselves. Conversely, capitalism at its core requires selfishness. Economic actors in a capitalist system gain in proportion to what they themselves contribute, so it is logical (and true) that people, under capitalism, would try to gain as much and spend as little as possible. Competition and its consequential inequalities are innate attributes of private businesses, regardless of the types of people involved. Consider the following thought experiment: two companies, we'll call them Company A and Company B, both have beneficent CEOs who do philanthropic work with their money and the companies are of the exact same industry. Consumers have to pick which company to spend money on. Company A lowers their prices, and as a result more consumers choose Company A. Company A then becomes more successful than Company B because they are preferred to consumers, which leads to an inequality between the companies, and Company B starts to struggle. This has nothing to do with the demeanors of the individuals involved, but the mere fact that competition and inequality are inherent qualities of capitalism, because people are systemically incentivized to make selfish decisions.

Brennan does discuss and attempt to refute Cohen's association of socialism with the principles of community and equality, so I will entertain his ideas here briefly. Brennan says that the connection between socialism and equality and community is completely arbitrary, since socialism is merely a way of distributing control of objects. He argues that the dispositions of generosity, friendship, unselfishness, and the other positive aspects of community are not unique to socialism and socialism therefore does not deserve to be necessarily equated to these

attributes. Brennan's Mickey Mouse Clubhouse Village is his example of this, since actors in this fictional village are unselfish, friendly, and generous, yet the society is purely capitalist. In response to this, I reiterate that competition and inequality are inevitable consequences of capitalism, even in this ideal example of Mickey Mouse Clubhouse Village. Even the all-too-friendly Mickey Mouse has to choose where to spend his money among multiple options and would only logically pick the way to gain the most from spending the least. He is responsible for making decisions that impact his own property, so it is obvious that he would make these choices for his own economic benefit. It is important to note that this need not demand Mickey Mouse desires other people not to benefit also; in fact, Mickey Mouse (like some real people) has desires for others' well-being and has no desire for exploitation or abuse. Yet the simple fact that capitalism organizes private property on an individual level forces self-centered decision-making, counteracting the ideals of pure community and equality.

Regardless of how convincing arguments for socialism are, there is the counterargument that it does not promote equality and community as shown by the examples of communist dictatorships throughout history. I will argue here why this potential counterargument does not diminish Cohen's point about socialism's desirability since he is willing to concede that we may not know how to correctly implement it. I will summarize (and support) Cohen's stance on the feasibility of socialism and then explain why the counterargument of communist regimes only targets socialism's feasibility, not the necessary principles that make it desirable. Cohen takes an "agnostic" stance towards socialism in practice, arguing that we may not now, or ever know how to implement it at a large scale (74). He discusses how limits of "social technology" may prevent us from currently knowing how to implement socialism correctly in a way that will allow it to fulfill its ideal principles and mimic the camping trip microcosm. The problem of maintaining

market efficiency under socialism is a real risk, since the spread of market information caused by changing prices and certain incentives for production may be lacking under socialism. Cohen mentions Carens' and Roemer's ideas for socialist implementation taking these potential faults into account, which shows that people have considered how to put socialist ideals into practice and it remains a possibility that a realistic and effective organization could be realized in the future (73). The overall point Cohen makes in *Why Not Socialism?* allows for this lack of certainty regarding socialism's feasibility, because his argument that socialism's principles are desirable can still hold.

Now I will discuss in more detail the counterargument that since examples of communist regimes certainly do not have desirable principles, socialism is not desirable. The history of Stalin's Soviet Union, Mao Zedong's China, and other communist societies are characterized by dictators abusing power and causing the suffering of many. Citizens starved, economic production plummeted, and many were killed under these communist regimes. Clearly, these dictatorships are not desirable and do not reflect the ideals of communal reciprocity, generosity, and equality. As a result, there is an argument to be made that socialism does not have the necessary principles of communal reciprocity, generosity, and equality because as these examples show, socialism actually led to the opposite. In response to this, I argue that this is a result of poor implementation, relating to Cohen's point that we do not yet have the social infrastructure to put socialism into practice. The tragedies of communist regimes are due to the dictatorships that rose because central planning was needed, but totalitarianism is not a necessary attribute of socialism. A way to think about this is to consider professional basketball uniforms. NBA players wear shorts because this seems like a reasonable piece of clothing for playing basketball. It is clearly unreasonable to define basketball by the fact that players wear shorts, because not

only is not a necessary attribute, but there is always the possibility that a better piece of clothing will be conceived of, even if we do not know it.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the existence of totalitarian dictators is not a necessary part of socialism since they have nothing to do with its defining economic organization. Historically, selfish rulers rose to power and prevented socialist ideals from coming to fruition, but this would not be the case if we had the correct social infrastructure to implement socialism correctly.

In summary, although Brennan thinks Cohen commits a logical fallacy in his defense of socialism's desirability, I argued how Cohen's argument is valid because his example socialist society is based on socialism's inherent principles, which contrast those of capitalism. I discussed how the history of communist regimes does not invalidate Cohen's point because he is clear to accept that we may not currently have the social infrastructure to implement socialism. While philosophers and economists contemplate the social infrastructure that would be necessary to implement socialism, in the meantime, we can use Cohen's point as reason to consider policies that would bring more community and equality to our current system of capitalism, such as a more expansive welfare state with universal healthcare and education. Or at least we can go camping.

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<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge that there are not enough problems with current basketball attire to perfectly equate it to the impact of historical communist rulers, but the point here is to show totalitarian regimes are as separate from socialism as shorts are from basketball.

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### Works Cited

G. A. Cohen. *Why Not Socialism?* Princeton University Press, 1941.

Jason Brennan. *Why Not Capitalism?* Routledge, 2014.