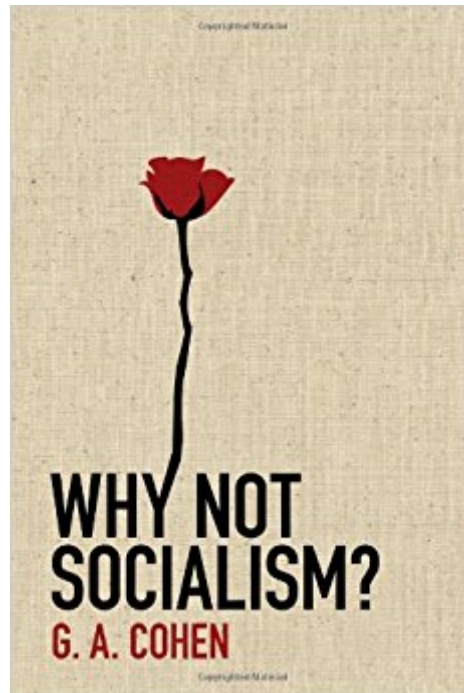


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Why Not Socialism?



Synopsis

Is socialism desirable? Is it even possible? In this concise book, one of the world's leading political philosophers presents with clarity and wit a compelling moral case for socialism and argues that the obstacles in its way are exaggerated. There are times, G. A. Cohen notes, when we all behave like socialists. On a camping trip, for example, campers wouldn't dream of charging each other to use a soccer ball or for fish that they happened to catch. Campers do not give merely to get, but relate to each other in a spirit of equality and community. Would such socialist norms be desirable across society as a whole? Why not? Whole societies may differ from camping trips, but it is still attractive when people treat each other with the equal regard that such trips exhibit. But, however desirable it may be, many claim that socialism is impossible. Cohen writes that the biggest obstacle to socialism isn't, as often argued, intractable human selfishness--it's rather the lack of obvious means to harness the human generosity that is there. Lacking those means, we rely on the market. But there are many ways of confining the sway of the market: there are desirable changes that can move us toward a socialist society in which, to quote Albert Einstein, humanity has "overcome and advanced beyond the predatory stage of human development."

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Customer Reviews

"Characteristically lucid, engaging and gently humorous. . . . Cohen says things that need to be said, often better than anyone else; and his last book is especially effective as an argument against the obstacles to socialism typically ascribed to human selfishness. His style of argument is very

accessible, and it is certainly a more attractive mode of persuasion than dreary analyses of how capitalism actually works."--Ellen Meiksins Wood, London Review of Books "Is socialism really such an alien way of organizing human society? In this stimulating essay titled *Why Not Socialism?* (just 92 pages long), the late Oxford philosopher G. A. Cohen invites us to think seriously about what socialism has to offer in comparison with capitalism."--Sanford G. Thatcher, Centre Daily Times "Beautifully written. . . . In sublimely lucid fashion, Cohen draws up taxonomies of equality, offers ethical objection to capitalism . . . and distinguishes between two questions: is socialism desirable?; and, if desirable, is it feasible? . . . Tiny books are all the rage in publishing nowadays; this is one of the few that punches well above its weight."--Steven Poole, The Guardian "[A] stimulating and thoughtfully argued advocacy of the better world that we need to fight for."--Andrew Stone, Socialist Review "A quietly urgent book."--Owen Hatherley, Philosophers' Magazine "Cohen brings his characteristic clarity to his final defence of socialism."--Tim Soutphommasane, The Australian "No doubt the best forms of socialist organization will emerge, like everything else, after much trial and error. But a vast quantity of preliminary spadework is necessary to excavate the assumptions that keep us from even trying. With *Why Not Socialism?*, Cohen has turned over a few shovelfuls, bringing us a little nearer the end of the immemorial--but surely not everlasting--epoch of greed and fear."--George Scialabba, Commonweal "[Here] we have a renowned scholar producing an accessible, concise work addressing a vital topic from a committed, progressive standpoint: would that more of today's academic star scholars would follow this example."--Frank Cunningham, Socialist Studies "Why Not Socialism? is a lucid and accessible statement of some of Cohen's deepest preoccupations."--Alex Callinicos, Radical Philosophy "However small the package . . . the problems that Cohen addresses in this slim volume are of enormous importance, and can be taken seriously by readers ranging from those with only a tangential interest in the field, to serious scholars of egalitarian and socialist thought."--Robert C. Robinson, Political Studies Review

"Why Not Socialism? very elegantly advances philosophical arguments that Cohen has famously developed over the past twenty years, and it does so in a manner that is completely accessible to nonphilosophers. The book brilliantly captures the essence of the socialist ethical complaint against market society. *Why Not Socialism?* is a very timely book."--Hillel Steiner, University of Manchester "Cohen makes out the case for the moral attractiveness of socialism based on the rather homely example of a camping trip. The positive argument of his book is impressive, and there is a rather disarming combination of simplicity of presentation and example with a deep intellectual engagement with the issues. It is very clear that there is an analytically powerful mind at work

here."--Jonathan Wolff, author of *Why Read Marx Today?*

Why Not Socialism? If you are considering buying this book be sure to read the "Product Description" so that you know the size of what you are getting for your money: it is not just "concise," it is tiny, no more than about 10,000 words. As an alternative, you may want to check your library for an earlier version, which appeared in *Democratic Equality: What Went Wrong?*, edited by Edward Broadbent (2001). If you are not already familiar with Cohen (or even if you are) you may want to view the obituary that appeared in the *Guardian* (August 10, 2009), which provides an excellent overview of his life and thought: [...]. In this little essay Cohen pursues a helpful allegory, that of a group on a camping trip, to probe reciprocity and exchange motivations and principles. He illustrates how three forms of the principle of equality plus the principle of community might apply to the campers' behavior. He advocates "communal reciprocity," a principle that involves giving or sharing not because of what one can get in return, but because the recipient needs what is given. Think of it as a counter-balance to the role of selfishness in the classic allegorical work on economic motivations, Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees*. Further details of Cohen's argument are ably summarized in the Gintis review, so I will not repeat them. I will say, though, that Gintis seems too harsh on Cohen on a couple of points. First, Cohen is more accepting of markets than Gintis suggests -- Cohen allows that markets perform a valuable information function and he rejects central planning for that reason (it is perhaps unfortunate that he uses the term "predation" to characterize market motivations). Second, Cohen likely would have agreed with most of what Gintis says about the heterogeneity of human motivations. Cohen was not one-sided: "Both selfish and generous propensities reside, after all, in (almost?) everyone," he wrote. As Gintis stresses, one of the major problems Cohen is up against is that it is not clear how the conditions of a camping trip, where the participants generally are expected to follow his equality and community principles, can realistically be brought to scale for an entire society. Cohen himself recognizes that it may not be feasible. It is worth pointing out, however, that there are obviously already many societal mechanisms that tap people's communal motivations (charities, volunteer work, underpaid service corps, and so on) and that as Cohen infers, many of us (probably the majority) do not think they are such a bad thing. The other major problem Cohen faces is that we expect our economy to be as productive (efficient) as possible, and while many may be willing to trade-off a bit of efficiency to gain equality or community, there are limits. Cohen was a political philosopher, not an economist, so he offers little to directly address that problem here (other than to reference John Roemer). Short as it is, maybe even largely because it is so brief (no problem to finish it), *Why Not Socialism?* is worth

reading. But if you buy it perhaps you will want to share it with others, thus applying both the community principle (if you expect nothing in return) and the principle of economic efficiency (reducing the cost per reader).

"Why Not Socialism?" presents a short, utopian argument that contains many interesting nuggets of truth. I agree with Cohen that greed and predation are the two critical attributes of a market economy, but I think Cohen generalizes too much. Globalization has given the world a capitalism that is beyond juridical checks and balances; reform and regulation are desperately needed. But I am not willing to say that the operation of small-town or regional capitalism, and the markets they respond to, is necessarily antithetical to the values of community and equality. Those of us who consider ourselves leftists must recognize that Socialism, national or international, is a pipe-dream. It's never going to happen and it shouldn't. But if I might expropriate Cohen's last sentence in the book, "I do not think the right conclusion is to give up" on moving certain key industries (health care and energy production/distribution are two that immediately come to mind) out of market-place capitalism and into non-market socialism. It is here that Cohen's arguments based on community and equality ring most true. It is this socialism that can happen and should. It is this that we socialists need to work towards.

After insisting on the topic of socialist egalitarianism for research, I was ultimately lead to Gerald Cohen. After seeing the title, "Why Not Socialism," I was immediately drawn to the single rose growing on the cover. The book offers a positive, inspiring, and at times emotional, side of an argument that is typically backed by condescending elitists in addition to being opposed by condescending elitists. Cohen, after releasing this book as one last lesson to offer, ends the book by telling socialists to not give up. I cannot tell if I am in tears right now because I have stayed up all night, captivated within this enthralling text, or because it truly shows most socialists as the optimistic humanitarians they wish to be. It is deeply touching to see Cohen reprint this essay as a single message to show the world the socialist as a selfless human being, opposed to the destructive terrorist that we are typically painted as on main stream media... Thank you, Gerald Cohen. Rest in Peace.

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