

Why Not Socialism

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ABSTRACT: According to G.A. Cohen, the principles of justice are insensitive to facts about human moral limitations. This assumption allows him to mount a powerful defense of socialism. Here, I present a dilemma for Cohen. On the one hand, if such socialism is to be realized through collective property ownership, then the information problem renders the ideal *incoherent*, not merely *infeasible*. On the other hand, if socialism is to incorporate private ownership of productive assets, then Cohen loses the resources to distinguish his view from capitalism. For, if agents were ideally motivated, there would be no need for coercive taxation schemes and limitations on trade. Moreover, incorporating coercion drastically undermines Cohen's original argument for socialism, which relies on an analogy to a camping trip among friends.

1. Introduction

Most critiques of socialism appeal to the practical difficulties in achieving its goals. In particular, many argue that the selfish nature of humans makes socialism difficult to achieve or sustain in a way that doesn't dramatically decrease the average person's well-being. Human beings respond to (mostly selfish) incentives, the thought goes, and socialism saps those incentives. Capitalism, on the other hand, allows individuals with selfish incentives to produce relatively much more, thereby increasing average welfare. As Adam Smith wrote, "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages."¹

As empirical support, people often point to the fact that life under communist regimes like the USSR, Mao's China, or Khmer Rouge Cambodia – which attempted collective ownership and central command to various degrees – was much worse for the average person than life under broadly capitalist regimes like the U.K., the U.S., Hong Kong, or Japan. The dramatic difference in living standards over time between North and South Korea is also stark. Around 100 million people

¹ Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 27.

are estimated to have died owing to causes like starvation and execution within the communist experiments of the 20th century.² Even today, indices of “economic freedom” correlate strongly with indices of average well-being, such as the Human Development Index.³

Gerald Allen Cohen’s distinctive contribution within this debate is to claim that none of this shows that the ideal of socialism is defective. In his *Why Not Socialism?* Cohen suggests that if socialism hasn’t worked because we have been too selfish or power-thirsty for it to work, that reflects badly on *us* not on socialism. This claim is defended in the context of a broader picture according to which the principles of justice ought not to be sensitive to people’s moral flaws. Here is Richard Arneson’s way of characterizing the view:

[Cohen] thinks that what is just is ideally fair. What is ideally fair in given circumstances depends on what those circumstances actually are. What would be ideally fair if humans could secrete manna from their fingertips is not relevant. But to discover what is ideally fair one should abstract from any limits in people’s willingness to comply with fairness constraints or to promote fairness goals. So if equality turns out to be ideally fair, it remains so even if we humans are so constituted that we are bound to act against this norm.⁴

There’s something deeply appealing about this idea. As Jason Brennan explains in a critique of Cohen’s book, whether or not governments, given their moral limitations, are actually disposed to follow the principles of just war theory should plausibly have no bearing upon whether just war theory is true. Likewise, whether or not people, given their moral limitations, are disposed to make socialism work has no bearing upon whether socialist principles are true.⁵

In what follows, I will present a dilemma for defenders of socialism operating in this vein (though it may not strictly be a dilemma, depending on how one thinks about it). The first horn is to try to model society directly after Cohen’s camping trip as described in *Why Not Socialism?* – that is, a society where there are no private property rights and resources are communally shared. I will specify several ways in which such a society can be modeled and show that all such models will face

² Schmidtz and Brennan, *A Brief History of Liberty*; Pipes, *Communism*.

³ Fraser Institute, “Economic Freedom of the World”; UN Development Programme, “Human Development Data (1990-2015) | Human Development Reports.”

⁴ Arneson, “Justice Is Not Equality,” 373.

⁵ Brennan, *Why Not Capitalism?*

severe problems having to do with coordination or division of labor or both, drawing upon the insights of Adam Smith and F.A. Hayek. Crucially, however, these problems will have nothing to do with assumed moral failings. Moreover, I will argue that any technological advance that could solve these problems will render human cooperation, and thus socialism, besides the point.

The second horn will consider “market socialism,” where the idea is to allow markets to function but still hold on to socialist principles. However, given his background view on which thinking about justice requires abstracting away from bad human motivations, I will argue that the market socialist ideal motivated from Cohen’s starting points will involve productive property rights along with massive *voluntary* redistribution. This, I will argue, makes Cohenite ideal socialism a subset of capitalism rather than a theory that stands in opposition to it – for, capitalism is consistent with a variety of views as to what obligations we have to give to people who have less than we do.

2. Cohenite Socialism

In his last treatment of the subject, Cohen motivates the socialist ideal via comparison to a camping trip among friends. Suppose we’re on a camping trip, and there is no hierarchy between us. We have a set of resources – pots and pans, fishing rods, oil, and so on – that are to be used collectively; nobody lays special claim to exclusive use of these materials. Individuals have different tastes and talents, but they are united by the common goal that each person on the trip should have a good time.⁶

Such a camping trip, Cohen says, is decidedly more desirable than a camping trip in which market-like attitudes prevail. Imagine that one of the campers, Harry, lays claim to the tastier fish because he’s the best fisherman. Another camper, Sylvia, finds an apple tree on a hike but only agrees to disclose its location in return for perks. Morgan, having a well-stocked pond nearby left to him by his father, seeks to receive better options at dinner. Such attitudes and demands would be frowned upon.

⁶ Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?*

Cohen argues that the principles that reflect the ethos of the camping trip are: *socialist equality of opportunity* and *community*. The first principle seeks to equalize differences in opportunity resulting from social circumstances as well as natural luck. The second principle involves two main aspects. First, it seeks to reduce certain inequalities of outcome that are countenanced by the equality of opportunity principle – if inequalities get too large, Cohen thinks, we can’t adequately understand each other’s struggles and prospects in life. Secondly, community involves *reciprocity*, the ethos according to which “I serve you not because of what I can get in return for doing so, but because you need or want my service, and you, for the same reason, serve me.”⁷

Cohen then seeks to motivate the view that these principles are the principles that ought to guide society as a whole. Cohen’s ideally just society is one where the ethos of the camping trip is accepted broadly in society, and further, society is organized so as to realize the two principles. Some critics have questioned whether this move is legitimate; that is, they have sought to point out important dis-analogies between a camping trip among friends and society at large.⁸ In this paper, my aim is not to challenge Cohen’s analogy; I will simply grant that the two principles he favors are the principles that ought to guide society.

The core move in Cohen that makes his defense of socialism interesting and unique is that he believes concerns of feasibility should not guide our understanding of justice – in particular, if the infeasibility is due to non-ideal human motivations. This underlies his earlier critique of John Rawls’s difference principle, which seeks to incorporate incentives for the talented. We can depart from strict equality according to Rawls (when thinking about the basic structure of society), so long as the position of the worst off is thereby enhanced. Such a situation would arise if the talented require incentives to motivate them to work harder and thus produce a surplus that benefits the worst off. Cohen, however, argues that such a society is not one which embraces the *ethos* of justice. If the talented are really committed to equality, they would not demand such incentives. Rather, they would freely choose to work hard without demanding that they be paid more than others. The difference principle, then, is no principle of justice.⁹

⁷ Cohen, 39.

⁸ See Ronzoni, “Life Is Not a Camping Trip – on the Desirability of Cohenite Socialism.”

⁹ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*; Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*; Cohen, “If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re so Rich?”; Cohen, “Facts and Principles.”

Hence, according to Cohen, when we are theorizing about what justice demands, we should stipulate that all members of the society accept and are motivated by the principles of justice. To say that given human nature, individuals would never embrace the camping trip ethos is thus no argument against Cohen. All this would tell us, according to his view, is that people are not good enough for socialism – *not* that socialism isn't the true theory of justice.

3. The Camping Trip Society

Suppose that Cohen's camping trip argument convinces us all. We all realize that the just society looks like the camping trip described in *Why Not Socialism?* In addition, we acquire the right motivations – we lose our selfishness, greed, and exploitative tendencies, and become committed to realizing the just ideal in our world. How should we go about (re)organizing society?

In the ideal camping trip, resources are communally shared, and within that circumscribed context, there's nothing that resembles private productive property which is the hallmark of capitalist society. Nonetheless, individuals know what is to be used by whom when; so when Harry takes the fishing rod to go fishing, others won't lay claim to using it at the same time. Since the trip is a cooperative venture, and since the campers are ideally motivated, this doesn't bother anybody. Harry doesn't lay unique claim to the fish he catches as a result. Neither does he demand more fish because he is particularly good at fishing. Rather, as the campers are committed to the ideals of socialist justice and community, all resulting production (cooked fish meals, for example) are shared equally.

All this doesn't mean, of course, that each resource must be shared equally with all people at all times. Rather, how things are allocated is a function, in part, of need. Thus, if Leslie falls sick with a non-contagious disease and there is only enough medicine for one person at the time, it's not as if the campers will all demand equal shares. Instead they will be disposed to give the medicine to Leslie, since she is the one in need of it.

“From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” as the Marxist slogan goes.¹⁰ When people hear this, some may be inclined to see an element of force or coercion – it sounds as if

¹⁰ For a modern defense of this principle, see Carens, “An Interpretation and Defense of the Socialist Principle of Distribution.”

people are forced to contribute according to their abilities. Notice, however, that such force won't be necessary in the society we are imagining. Since people are moved by the ideals of socialist justice and communal care, Harry the expert fisherman won't need to be forced to go fishing; instead, he will do so voluntarily, in order to serve his fellow campers. Likewise, the campers won't need to be forced to give the medicine to needy Leslie; they care about her and realize she needs it more than they do. I will talk of resources being shared "equitably" rather than equally, to accommodate this qualification.

Now, what would a camping-trip society look like? One possibility is that our world becomes a system of many small camping trips, rather than one huge 7-billion strong camping trip directed by a central authority. The small camping trips are essentially workers' communes, where productive resources are collectively owned and operated, and the resulting production is shared equitably. Each member of such communes is expected to contribute as they can, in ways that benefit the commune.

Some ways of spending time may be enjoyable but not benefit the commune. Thus, suppose Morgan really loves to play the ukulele for others; however nobody in his particular commune cares to listen to him playing. Morgan can thus be more helpful to the commune by doing something like farming, or cooking, or cleaning. Perhaps so much will be obvious to Morgan, since nobody has really given him positive feedback on his ukulele playing.

The first thing this illustrates is that people in these communes need to have a good sense of the preferences of others. The larger the communes get, the more intractable this problem becomes. If the city of Seattle was one giant commune, how could the individuals within it – even if they were perfectly morally just – have an accurate sense of the preferences of all the others in the city? It's hard enough to keep track of the preferences of one's close friends and family! How is Morgan to know whether he should devote his time to playing the ukulele at parks or cleaning or farming or cooking? The problem becomes more intense with increasing numbers of possible occupations and increasing numbers of people.

But let's get back for now to the case of the small farming commune, of which Morgan is part. How is he to choose between the obviously productive activities – farming, cooking, or cleaning? How is he to know where his skills are most useful in terms of benefiting the commune? And what is the

appropriate sense of 'benefit'? Should he do what maximizes the production of the commune – maximizing grain output, say? Or should he do what increases the average welfare of people in the commune? Or should he do what strikes an appropriate balance between pursuing the things he likes and the things that benefit the commune?

Here's an obvious way all these things can come apart. Let's say that Morgan is slightly better at farming than at cooking, but he enjoys cooking a lot more than farming. While he would much rather cook, he will maximize the commune's grain production if he farms instead. Where should he work?

Here's another way these things can come apart. While Morgan is objectively better at farming than cooking – so that the ideal farming judge would rate him at a higher percentile of farmers than an ideal cooking judge would rate him among cooks – the people of this particular commune enjoy his food better than Leslie's food, even though Leslie happens to be an equally good cook. Suppose there is only one spot for cook, given how small the commune is. How is he to know, even if ideally motivated, whether to get into cooking or farming? One possible strategy is to have the communes vote on what people should do. So if a vote were to be held, perhaps Morgan would win out over Leslie in voting for "who should be the cook?" And we might say that given how altruistic and committed everyone is, people will always accept the results of votes.

But even this leads to intractable problems with communes of sufficient size. Let's say this farming commune contains 100 people. Twenty of them actually do the farming, while the others do auxiliary tasks such as building, cleaning, plumbing, etc. Now suppose Morgan is a terrific plower, and so the people doing the farming would vote for him to be plower. While he's less efficient at cleaning, the cleaners/maintainers enjoy his company a lot. Since they are motivated to benefit the commune the most, and they don't know about his terrific plowing skills (since they have no detailed knowledge of the farming practices), they reason that the way he can best benefit the commune is by cleaning and building with them and cracking the funny jokes he does. So this group will vote for him to join them. As a matter of fact, Morgan will improve net welfare more by plowing – but if the cleaners/maintainers outnumber the farmers, they will vote for him to join them, and everyone will suffer as a result. The yields won't be as good, and two people will have to do the plowing instead of Morgan (given how good he is). The problem with voting then is that it's extremely hard for the average person in the commune to know where best someone's skills are

allocated. This is not as much a problem within specialized occupations – thus the farmers will have an easier time knowing that Morgan is the best plower. But nobody will be able to know where Morgan’s skills are best used – in cooking, cleaning, building or plowing. Voting will thus not be a good solution to the problem of labor allocation.

All this is not merely nitpicking. Bad allocations of labor can have real consequences. If people end up being assigned to do tasks they aren’t good at, or don’t enjoy, then things will not get done, or get done badly, no matter how virtuous everyone is. The result will be dysfunction and deprivation.

The problem gets drastically more severe in larger potential communes. Imagine the city of Seattle voting for whether a person should be a cook, or mechanic, or engineer or a host of other things, where they should work, and in what position. Is it even possible for the average resident of Seattle to make this determination about the other half a million people living in the city? How long would it take to fill the voting form? Just on labor allocation questions, people will be voting all day, every day.

The smaller the commune, then, the easier it is to solve labor allocation problems democratically. One thing this means is that a relatively coherent ideal of socialism must involve small communes. In small communes, like the camping trip scenario, it is easier for people to know where they can be most productive and helpful. The problem doesn’t go away entirely, of course, because it’s hard for everyone to know each other’s preferences, skills, and the like. Let’s then proceed with the idea that the socialist utopia will consist of small communes, each of which will harbor some inevitable inefficiencies and dysfunction, but still overall function well enough as units.

The question that arises next is: what will they produce? One possibility is that they will be self-sustaining – that is, they will produce whatever is necessary for the commune members. This is how the camping trip operates (after they have the initial endowment of equipment, which is cheating, in a way that will become evident presently). The campers produce things and consume them internally – they produce whatever they deem most necessary for their own welfare. So they fish, cook, make campfires, and so on.

But now, think about all the things that make modern life possible – roads, cars, antibiotics, computers, books, scientific research, vaccines, surgeries, pipes, ships, planes, steel, cranes, bricks,

concrete, nuts, bolts, pens, paper, light bulbs, electricity, sewage treatment facilities, telephones, fertilizers, textiles – could a commune of a hundred, or even a thousand, produce all of these things? Just think about what it would have to do. Mine its own iron ore, mix it with other materials to make steel, create factories to use that steel, have people operate those factories, have others study medicine, create medical equipment, make its own semiconductors, transistors, integrated circuits, light bulb filaments, motor engines, and so on. There is no way one thousand people can do all this. Perhaps a thousand people might barely be enough to do one of these tasks – mine iron ore, for example – but then they will have to be supplied externally – with equipment, food, medicines, etc.

Internally self-sufficient communes would thus result in simple agrarian or hunter-gatherer societies of the sorts our ancestors lived in thousands of years ago. There would be no vaccines, antibiotics – so mortality rates would soar, and become as high as they were, say, a thousand years ago. Bad motivations have nothing to do with any of this – it’s just impossible to have things like vaccines, computers, etc. without division of labor. Life would become drastically more miserable for the average person, and the majority of the world population will die because there won’t be enough food, since there won’t be things like fertilizers which make modern crop yields possible. Simple bacterial infections will also do much of the job.¹¹

It is extremely implausible that justice requires humanity to revert back to this comparative misery. Hence, we can’t have each commune producing all the things it needs. Communes will need to cooperate and coordinate with each other. Maybe one commune or set of linked communes will produce antibiotics, one will teach the doctors and send them out, one will mine the iron ore, another will produce transistors, and so on. Communes will thus need to engage in division of labor, as was emphasized by Adam Smith, if they are to come anywhere close to providing the sorts of goods we are used to in modern life, goods that drastically improve the lot of the average person.

How will they exchange goods with each other? One possibility is that they will trade – that is agree upon and execute mutually beneficial exchanges. The squash commune needs more antibiotics, and

¹¹ For more on life-expectancy, nutrition, and disease among modern hunter-gatherer societies see for example: Gurven and Kaplan, “Longevity Among Hunter- Gatherers”; Howell, *Demography of the Dobe !Kung*; Headland, “Ecosystemic Change in a Philippine Tropical Rainforest and Its Effect on a Negrito Foraging Society.” Among the !Kung, about 20% of infants died before the age of 1; among the Casiguran Agta that figure is 34%. Life expectancy among modern hunter-gatherers is typically in the 20-40 range.

the antibiotics commune needs food – no problem! Trade squash for antibiotics. Of course, given all the different things we need and given the perishable nature of things like squash and antibiotics, and the heavy nature of things like steel and ships, a vastly better way to go about things will be to use currency instead of barter. Since there is no central government issuing currency, people could probably use gold or cryptocurrency.

But all this is just *laissez-faire* capitalism between communes instead of individuals. Some communes will create things more efficiently, or create things that are in high demand, and as a result will earn more gold or cryptocurrency. Inequalities will arise, and some communes will become richer than others. The communes that make software or medicines might end up being much richer than those making food or clothing.

Now perhaps there will be a principle of community and socialist equality of opportunity accepted between communes, and not merely among them. So perhaps the rich communes will give their additional income to the poorer ones, till equity is achieved between communes. Yet this is still capitalism between communes – for, in capitalist societies nobody stops the rich from voluntarily giving to the poor. Nobody stops Jeff Bezos from sending money to Kenyan farmers or homeless individuals in Los Angeles.

Can we envision socialist, camping-trip-like relationships between communes as well as across communes? Thus, perhaps communes will work with each other in the way the campers do, rather than in the way individuals within a market system do. They will offer goods and services to each other based on need and free of charge. So, the plumbing commune(s) will go around fixing people's pipes, the medical commune(s) will run hospitals and train doctors, the food communes will produce and ship out food as the others need it, the steel commune will send out steel, and so on.

But now there arise several coordination problems, some of which resemble the problems within communes discussed earlier. First of all, how will people know how many communes are needed to produce steel as opposed to squash, antibiotics as opposed to transistors, automobiles as opposed to trained computer engineers, and so on? A related question is: for any given commune, how will it know what it should specialize in, so as to benefit society as a whole? Given the plethora of goods

needed to sustain modern life this is a problem of staggering complexity. Second, how will the communes know where their products are most needed and most beneficial to society as a whole?

Consider the following possibility. There are one hundred steel communes, each producing 10 units of steel per year. Their policy is to ship out steel to any commune that asks for it. This year, however, there are two thousand orders for steel, of one unit each. Where will they ship the steel? One possibility is to do it by lottery; the losers of the lottery will have to wait another year (or more) for their steel. There is a problem with doing this however – the lottery will be insensitive to facts about where the steel will be best used, and who needs the steel the most.

The natural alternative is that communes could rank the relative importance of the good in question for their purposes, so the supplier could take this into account. Perhaps they could say how important the steel is to them on a scale of one to five. The problem is that even if the communes are ideally motivated it's going to be (intractably) hard for them to know how important their shipment of steel is relative to shipments to other communes. Same goes for all the other goods. For example, the car commune will presumably want lots of steel and the steel will be important for its purposes. How is it to know the relative importance of the steel it receives when compared with the relative importance of the steel supplied to the antibiotics commune or one of the hundreds of construction communes? Moreover, how can they realistically keep track of who needs steel around the world and for what purpose? Since the steel is important to them in some way, and not a mere luxury good, they will all assign high importance to the order. They will do so not because they are selfish and want to accumulate steel, but rather because for all they know, the steel is best used if sent to them. Even if people are ideally motivated and will not abuse the priority ordering system, there will be no way for everyone to know how important their needs for a particular good are relative to all the other people in the world.

Such is the problem for merely one good. The problem becomes even more staggeringly complex when all the commodities are brought into focus. Moreover, these various problems will interact with each other. How will the shipping commune know whether to prioritize steel shipments to the antibiotics commune or solar panel shipments to the squash commune or food shipments to the plumbing commune? If the steel shipment is not prioritized, there can be significant delays even if the steel communes were to agree to ship to the antibiotics commune.

The second problem mentioned earlier is the problem of labor allocation. How can we know whether we need ten or twenty steel communes to ensure that production is at a level so as to ensure people's needs are met? Should there be six or eight airline operating communes? And which routes should they staff? How many workers are needed to produce adequate numbers of transistors for the world? How about textiles, cars, paper? And how do you know that your commune is doing the best it can? Maybe your commune is producing transistors but are the members' skills and talents better used making cars, given the other people who are making cars and transistors, given how many tons of semiconductors are being produced and how much steel, given how many people need cars as opposed to computers? How could you come to know all this information? And how can you spend the (infinite) time required to come to acquire this information given all the other stuff you have to do?

These coordination problems are lessened but nowhere close to alleviated with the introduction of central authority. Traditionally this has involved coercive state operators assigning occupations to citizens and quotas to factories and farming communes. But given ideally motivated individuals we can imagine away the need for coercion – rather, perhaps there could be economic information communes, which would specialize in telling the other communes what to make and who to send it to. Even so, however, the information problem is intractable as emphasized by Ludwig von Mises and F.A. Hayek.¹²

For, such a centralized authority is faced with the overwhelming task of aggregating the needs of all the world's individuals, their productive capacities, and producing an allocation function assigning activities to communes. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that needs and productive capacities constantly change. I may not need antibiotics now but may need them in a week. Your commune may be producing steel at breakneck speed today but may slow down tomorrow if there's a delay in iron shipments or some workers fall ill or a new production technique you decide to try out doesn't work so well. And so on for each individual, each commodity, and each commune producing and delivering their respective commodities. By what mechanism could a central authority, without Godlike omniscience, acquire all the particular knowledge? Abstract knowledge of science or

¹² von Mises, "Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth"; Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society." Socialist economists in the first part of the 20th century, among them Oscar Lange, tried to work out a solution for the socialist planning problem; see Lange, "On the Economic Theory of Socialism." However, most economists today – even those sympathetic to socialism – believe Hayek came out on top in that debate. See, for example Roemer, "Socialism Revised."

engineering won't do, as Hayek emphasized – what is needed is very specific knowledge about individual preferences, abilities, available materials, and so forth.

The second thing to note about the central authority proposal is that it's not democratic. The decisions made by the central authority are not sensitive to opinions of all the world's individuals, even if, realizing that this is a better way to organize, the world's individuals are disposed and motivated to do as the authority says, even without threat of coercion. Indeed, such a step is inevitable to lessen some of the problems with full democratic decision-making on economic matters. There is simply no way for the average person to have anywhere close to all of the specific knowledge required to make an informed vote about which communes do what and ship to whom, especially given all the other things they have to do.

The camping trip scenario assumes that people do what they're relatively good at and understand the needs of others. This is a coherent ideal when we're talking about a group of five or ten individuals. But even in this camping trip, if people had no idea about the needs of others or what they're good at doing, things would not go well. So imagine that Leslie has never tried fishing before but she decides to give it a shot. Morgan, a terrible ukulele player, decides to play all day near the campsite. Harry goes on a hike and brings back berries which turn out to be inedible. And so on. The result is no food, terrible day-long music, no campfire. My point is obviously not that campfires usually or often end this way – they don't. But the point is that them not ending up this way relies crucially upon the fact that within small groups humans are able to have a decent idea of what they can do to help the group.

Cohen is sensitive to the kinds of worries raised above, but he misunderstands their force. He says, “We socialists don't *now* know how to replicate camping trip procedures on a nationwide scale, amid the complexity and variety that comes with nationwide size. We don't *now* know how to give collective ownership and equality the real meaning that it has in the camping trip story but which it didn't have in the Soviet Union and in similarly ordered states.”¹³

This gloss underestimates the potency of Hayek's critique. For, a system that did away with markets and didn't want to invite massive misallocations and shortages would require a central authority to

¹³ Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?*, 75–76.

know all the (important) preferences of each individual, all the specific knowledge of what commodities exist where (how much iron there is within each mine, and so on) the specific skills and capacities of each individual in each domain, the specific productivity of each machine and factory and kiosk. In short: what is needed is omniscience.

Is this a merely practical problem? After all, there are possible worlds where an omniscient supercomputer periodically scans brains (since preferences change over time), runs simulations (predicting what people will want in the future and how the world in general will evolve – which mines will break down, etc.), and so on and tells each person what economic choices to make at every instant. But is this socialism? In such a world, people are not making decisions, they are not figuring out together what they should do. In such a world, there is no human cooperation – except in the very attenuated sense that people cooperate by following the supercomputer’s instructions. Alternatively, we could imagine that each member of society is omniscient. But this too would change the nature of human cooperation to such an extent that the resulting society would bear little resemblance to the traditionally conceived ideal of socialism.

The other possibility is to imagine a world with no scarcity. Thus, we can imagine each individual provided with a machine that can instantly produce anything they want. (Strictly speaking, even this won’t eliminate all scarcity, since many of the things we desire involve human services. But let’s keep that to one side). But again, this is not a mere practical worry. In a world where such machines existed and could produce what we wanted ex-nihilo, there wouldn’t be a need for human cooperation, and thus socialism would be beside the point.

The camping trip ideal of socialism – one where resources are communally shared and markets are avoided – is not only infeasible but incoherent. The kinds of science-fiction scenarios which would solve Hayek’s information problem are scenarios where there is little or no human cooperation. If socialism is supposed to be a theory of how we should cooperate together, the metaphysical possibility of such scenarios is of no help for the theory. Thus, it’s not that we aren’t good enough for camping trip socialism, but rather that camping trip socialism is an incoherent ideal – its incoherence may be well hidden to many because of the complexities of coordination and interaction, but an incoherent ideal is what we’ve got in the end.

Even critics of Cohen like Jason Brennan have ceded too much in this regard by allowing that the problems of information and coordination are merely practical.¹⁴ But they're not merely practical in the sense in which the problem of my owning a large house in Malibu is merely practical. Indeed, given my present occupation and stage in life it is practically difficult for me to afford such a house. But it's not incoherent to conceive of a world in which I do own such a house – for instance, a world in which a billionaire gives me a gift of several million dollars. The problem that camping trip socialism faces, however, is different in kind. Camping trip socialism is incoherent in the way that the ideal of being a friend to everyone living in Tokyo is incoherent. For friendship involves, *inter alia*, intimacy, mutual understanding, and special obligations. One cannot stand in the relationship of friendship to nine million people. This isn't merely a practical difficulty; once we reflect on what friendship involves and think carefully about what it would take to be friends with everyone in Tokyo, we realize the ideal is incoherent.

Camping trip socialism as an ideal involves humans cooperating to produce what they need by making decisions together, and each person's needs being reasonably well-met, relative to modern standards (as opposed to hunter-gatherer standards). This ideal, I have argued, is incoherent – it is conceivable only insofar as one fails to adequately consider and reason through the required organizational details. Not all things that are conceivable are coherently conceivable, and camping trip socialism is one of these things.

Jason Brennan in his *Why Not Capitalism?* claims that Cohen's core mistake is to compare ideal socialism with non-ideal capitalism, and to find the latter wanting. According to Brennan, while this may be true, *ideal* capitalism (where bad human motivations are abstracted away) will be better than ideal socialism because it will allow for personal projects in a way that the latter will not. According to Brennan, this is the right comparison to make and it is one where capitalism wins out. I think this is too generous, at least if we're interpreting Cohenite socialism as involving a camping trip-like society. Socialism of *that* kind cannot be desirable *pace* Cohen, because it is an incoherent ideal. An incoherent ideal cannot be desirable.

¹⁴ Brennan, *Why Not Capitalism?*

4. Market Socialism and Cohen's Two Principles

The problems of the camping trip world, interpreted as consisting of non-market-based communes modeled after Cohen's camping trip, do not arise in much of the real world due to the presence of markets. The price signals operative within markets serve to communicate what is needed where, which commodities are most efficient for what purposes, and where labor is best used.

Thus suppose Morgan, a mediocre ukulele player, is deciding between playing the instrument in parks for passersby and becoming a nurse. As a matter of fact, people don't really benefit by his playing ukulele in a way they would benefit by his becoming a nurse. The labor market conveys this information to him via the price mechanism – while he will make little to no money playing the ukulele in the park (people won't want to pay for that), he will make much more money by training and becoming a nurse – since people's lives are made much better by him doing this, they are willing to pay for it.

Now suppose there arises a shortage of nurses in Montana. This shortage will be unstable and short lived within a market system. For, as people are willing to pay more for direly needed goods, nurse salaries will rise, incentivizing nurses from other states to move there. Eventually, the salaries will drop towards an equilibrium point. Though of course, equilibrium here doesn't mean that nurse salaries in Montana will become equal to salaries in, say, New York; this will in part depend on a host of other factors, like living expenses in the two states, the desirability of living in either state, and so on.

What is true for labor is similarly true for a host of commodities. Suppose an iron mining operation in Australia breaks down for some reason. This means there is less total iron being produced. What will happen? The price of iron will rise. This will tell builders and manufacturers to use less iron (perhaps by temporarily ceasing production of barely profitable products) and to find substitutes for iron where possible – use wood instead of steel, where possible, and so on.

Hayek's insight was that individuals and government planners need to know very little about the sources and causes of the shortages in order to adjust appropriately. Thus, a construction manager in Brazil need not know why the iron shortage occurred and what needs to be done to fix it. All she needs to know is to economize on her use of iron in order to stay profitable. The same goes for the

infrastructure planner in China. Similarly, consumers of metal fencing, utensils, cars – goods that incorporate iron at some stage in production – need to know absolutely nothing about the mine in Australia in order to adjust their behavior. The resulting prices of various goods tells them all they need to know – it might induce them to move towards aluminum substitutes or to use more public transportation, for example.

Similarly, Morgan doesn't need to know much about the specific details of each person's wants and needs, or the numbers of people needed within each occupation to fulfill those needs. These facts are already implicit in the wages that nurses command. To the extent that more nurses are needed, the wages will go up, and to the extent that labor could be more efficiently used elsewhere, the wages will go down.

Socialists who want to accommodate these insights propose “market socialism.” While the specific proposals vary greatly, the core idea is to allow market forces to shape parts of the economy and to add a sufficiently progressive redistribution mechanism that prevents large enough inequalities of income or wealth. The maximally egalitarian option would be one that redistributes so that everyone receives equal post-tax income, while pre-tax income is allowed to vary greatly – an option explored in detail by Joseph Carens. Another possibility includes a sufficiently generous universal basic income along with progressive taxation as defended by Philippe van Parijs. John Roemer develops a proposal in which citizens start with an equal endowment of shares in productive assets, which they can trade. However, stringent restrictions on such trade are imposed so as to minimize potential inequality. David Schweickart defends a system in which the largest firms – the “commanding heights” of the economy are democratically run, and private ownership is forbidden. Price mechanisms are still operative though, and small to medium sized firms can be privately owned.¹⁵

What exact form the redistribution schemes and property relations would take will of course depend on which socialist principles are operative. For Cohen, the two key principles are *socialist equality of opportunity* and *community*.

Socialist equality of opportunity is the strongest of three forms of equality of opportunity that Cohen discusses. The first is *bourgeois equality of opportunity*, which forbids formal or informal

¹⁵ Carens, *Equality, Moral Incentives, and the Market*; Van Parijs, “Basic Income Capitalism”; Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*; Schweickart, *After Capitalism*.

restrictions on ownership or occupation (as well as other things relevant to one's life chances) based on things like class, race, or gender. Thus, a society in which women can't own property or blacks cannot become doctors violates the principle of bourgeois equality of opportunity. A stronger principle is *left-liberal equality of opportunity*, which additionally forbids people's having different life chances based on their social circumstances. Thus, for example, the income of one's parents should not affect where one ends up in life according to this principle. The principle thus recommends things like quality free or subsidized education in a way that bourgeois equality of opportunity doesn't. A society in which the children of the poor cannot receive an education because of the associated cost may satisfy the latter principle, but not left-liberal equality of opportunity (given the plausible assumption that lacking a particular level of education affects one's chances in life.) Socialist equality of opportunity goes further and calls for the cancellation of genetic advantage or disadvantage. The intuition is that we don't choose our genes, just as we don't choose our parents or circumstances of birth. Our life chances, the thought goes, shouldn't depend on things we don't choose.

Along with this principle, Cohen puts forth the ideal of community, which forbids certain inequalities of outcome that even socialist equality of opportunity allows. Particularly worrying for Cohen are inequalities arising due to option-luck, which are allowed by the latter principle. Cohen's ideal forbids inequalities of outcome from getting large enough because such inequalities erode the sense of community that the campers enjoy. People with great enough differences in life outcomes cannot understand each other's perspectives and struggles, according to Cohen.

One natural way to reflect Cohen's principles within a market society, it seems to me, is to institute sharply progressive taxation coupled with a substantial basic income. The latter will uphold the principle of community, by forbidding the gulf between the haves and the have-nots from getting sufficiently large. Now, some of this abandons particular convictions that Cohen shares with other traditional socialists. He claims for example, that "the market is intrinsically repugnant."¹⁶ But this revision is necessary given the argument of the previous section. It is further necessary because Cohen ascribes an essential character to market exchange that simply doesn't hold true. He writes,

¹⁶ Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?*, 78. See also, Vrousalis, "G. A. Cohen's Vision of Socialism."

“In the mutual provisioning of a market society, I am essentially indifferent to the fate of the farmer whose food I eat: there is little or no community between us.”

This may well be true as a matter of actual fact within a large supply chain, but it isn't always or essentially true. Are we really so indifferent and detached from our local bakers, baristas, teachers, students, doctors, nurses, bookstore owners, and so on? Sure, there's a sense in which we cannot feel “community” with the distant producers in various supply chains, but that's just because you can't know or be friends with everybody. And given modern division of labor, hundreds of millions of people cooperate to produce all the goods a typical person uses over the course of a day. But again, to insist that we know everybody who produces for us is to doom us to the life of subsistence farming, disease, and deprivation as described in the previous section.

Perhaps Cohen thinks that the mere act of trading value for value is intrinsically repugnant. But consider the following. Suppose the food rations organizer has given us one fruit each for the day. She gives you an apple and me a banana. You like bananas much more than apples, and vice versa. We realize that we'd both benefit by exchanging, and so we do. We also happen to be friends – I care about you, you care about me, and we care that we care about each other. Yet, this trade of fruits is a market exchange. Is there anything repugnant in this? If Cohen is right and that market exchange is “intrinsically repugnant” it follows that all market exchanges have repugnance within them. The above exchange clearly does not, and so Cohen is mistaken on that score.

So far, I have given various reasons to embrace market socialism, as opposed to camping-trip socialism, insofar as one accepts Cohen's two principles. If, as I have argued, market exchange doesn't forbid community and socialist equality of opportunity (given the possibility of redistribution), there is no reason not to allow it, if the alternatives all involve severe dysfunction and deprivation, as discussed in the preceding section. Despite his particular convictions, his two principles do not commit Cohen to disallowing market exchange in socialist utopia.

5. The Problem of Coercion

The question that now arises for Cohenite socialism is: why would redistributive taxation be necessary in the ideal socialist society? Taxation involves government coercion. If you don't pay

your taxes, you get notices and penalties, and if you ignore them for long enough, you go to jail. In fact, you will be physically dragged to jail if you don't even show up to the hearings, and if you don't cooperate with the police as they are dragging you to jail, they will beat, taser, or shoot you depending on how you fail to cooperate. Now, this coercion may well be justified, all things considered, but it is coercion nonetheless. Taxation is needed in cases where people won't voluntarily pitch in to provide certain public goods or social assistance programs or there are expected to be free riders. Pablo Gilabert, in discussing Cohenite socialism, writes that citizens, out of communal concern, would adopt coercive institutions because they "recognize their (and others') motivational frailty."¹⁷ He notes that Cohen himself talks about "forbidding" some practices that could undermine community.¹⁸

Yet, this seems like wanting to have one's cake and eating it too. As noted earlier, much of the distinctiveness and force of Cohen's defense of socialism lies in his idea that when thinking about what justice requires, we should not adjust for the moral flaws of people as they actually are. That idea also underwrites his famous critique of Rawls's difference principle. On this picture, we are to imagine that the society in question consists of individuals who are motivated by a sense of justice and are willing to do what justice requires. But such a society would be in no need of coercively imposed taxation – individuals will voluntarily give money away so as to satisfy socialist equality of opportunity and community.

To invoke the need for taxation is to invoke principles of regulation that take into account the moral limits of human beings – their limited capacity for altruism and cooperation. But on Cohen's picture, principles of regulation are not to be confused with principles of justice.¹⁹ Justice itself does not mandate coercive taxation – indeed, the two principles Cohen identifies can be satisfied in a society without such taxation, provided we idealize the motivations of persons living in that society.

The natural response here is to say the following. The identification of the principles of justice is an a priori endeavor. But it is then an empirical question how best we can achieve a society that approximates those ideals. And such a society may well require some coercive institutions. A society with such institutions, given human moral limitations, will more closely live up to fulfilling the two

¹⁷ Gilabert, "Cohen on Socialism, Equality and Community," 109.

¹⁸ Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?*, 37.

¹⁹ See Cohen, *Rescuing Justice and Equality*.

principles than a society without them. It is owing to this that a system of heavy redistributive taxation is needed. That taxation can then fund direct transfers as well as a variety of extensive government run programs that promote equality in various dimensions. In this way we arrive at something like the modern ideal of *social democracy*.

Yet, this strategy will invite a series of objections that would have been successfully evaded up to this point. This is the set of insights developed within the public choice tradition in economics. The core idea of public choice is that we shouldn't model people in a radically different way when they act within the market system and when they act qua agents of the state. People are people. They seek to promote their interests (which may not always be *selfish* interests) and different people can have different interests. Given this, we ought not to model the state as one benevolent actor, but rather as involving a set of individuals – politicians, bureaucrats, civil servants – all seeking to further separate interests. What this means in practice is that we shouldn't necessarily expect large government infrastructures to effectively promote some common social goal without carefully thinking about possibilities for corruption, rent-seeking, misallocation, and so on. Often, these considerations can militate against adopting some of the institutions favored by social democrats.²⁰

The second problem that coercive institutions present for Cohenite socialism is this. Surely, part of the attractiveness of the camping trip is that people voluntarily do what is needed in a way that reflects their care for one another, and their caring that they care for one another. Imagine instead that Harry is appointed to be the enforcer. What each person is to do is decided by the enforcer, who is tasked with thinking about whose skills are most productively used where. The enforcer also has the task of breaking the kneecaps of those who don't perform their assigned tasks or slack off while doing them.

Suddenly this camping trip doesn't seem all that attractive anymore. This is true even if the enforcer doesn't abuse his power – even if he is disposed only to break the kneecaps of people who don't cooperate as planned, and the plans that he comes up with are reasonable. I for one, would want nothing to do with such a trip. Moreover, this camping trip is unattractive even if nobody refuses to

²⁰ See for example: Krueger, "The Political Economy of the Rent-Seeking Society"; Buchanan and Tullock, *The Calculus of Consent*; Brennan and Buchanan, *The Reason of Rules*.

do their allotted tasks or slacks off and thus has to get kneecapped. It's questionable if the trip even displays community, as Cohen describes it, within the context of such a grave coercive threat.

Even if the enforcer is democratically elected, or the tasks of the campers are allocated on a democratic basis, this camping trip is unattractive. Would you go on such a camping trip, even with the nicest and most morally perfect of your friends? It's not an accident, I think, that Cohen's camping trip doesn't involve such a coercive enforcer, but merely social pressure and judgment. If the campers care about each other and further, care that they care about each other, they will be disposed towards indignation if someone starts behaving like a jerk or starts slacking off. But that's not the same as violence-backed coercion. Including coercive mechanisms, then, puts significant strain upon the argument from analogy that drives Cohen's *Why Not Socialism?*

What all this illustrates, I think, is that the fact that X is an ideal situation doesn't mean we should employ whichever coercive measures necessary to guarantee X. Furthermore, those coercive measures may end up defeating the very aspects of X that made it ideal. Are the ideals of community and friendship genuinely realized in the presence of a kneecapping enforcer? Indeed, a camping trip where people slack off here and there, and someone demands extra fish is better at embodying community than a trip with the kneecapping enforcer.

Similarly, it's not obvious at all that taxation promotes community all things considered. Community, for Cohen, involves express reciprocity – namely that we care for each other, and care that we care about each other, and act upon these attitudes. Involuntary taxation-cum-redistribution, it can be plausibly argued, cuts against this ideal – isn't it more in line with the ideal if I help you out *voluntarily*, with the background expectation that you will help me out were I to be in a similar situation, than if I help you out when someone tells me to do so at gunpoint? Even if I still care about you while being coerced by being held at gunpoint, the ideal of community is plausibly not embodied in this scenario.

I am claiming that the ideal market socialist society built upon Cohen's two principles will involve significant voluntary redistribution – the haves giving money to the have nots in such a fashion that the two principles are upheld within the society as a whole. The possible response that some people won't actually voluntarily redistribute because they are selfish or insufficiently committed to justice cuts little ice given Cohen's background view of the relation between justice and bad motivations.

Moreover, even if people as a matter of fact will not voluntarily distribute as much as Cohen wants, it still doesn't follow that forcing them to contribute on pain of imprisonment is all things considered more just or more in the service of promoting community.

Of course, some coordination will be necessary when it comes to voluntary redistribution. If I don't know who you're giving to, we may end up wiring funds to the same person or institution and end up overpaying. Furthermore, individuals' giving to others directly will presumably involve large transaction costs. In light of this, a group may maintain a database showing who has received what and who is in need of further funds (so that the principles are satisfied). Other agencies may serve as mediators that collect funds given on a voluntary basis and pay them out according to whatever redistribution scheme ends up being chosen. Presumably such agencies will try to prioritize the neediest individuals and try to figure out which methods of transfer yield the most "bang for the buck" in promoting community and socialist equality of opportunity. When it comes to realizing Cohen's principles on a large scale though, where transfers occur on a voluntary basis, there presumably will be strong economies of scale. Hence, in the ideal case, the agencies in question will operate on a much larger scale and budget than presently existing programs like GiveWell.

Now, philosophers within the effective altruist movement have recommended voluntary donations to such charities, typically to the order of ten percent of income. Naturally, socialists, and Cohen in particular, will adopt different donation recommendations than these philosophers. Indeed, principles as strong as socialist equality of opportunity and community – especially if these are to be realized on a world-wide basis – will require the world's rich (which would include median-income Westerners) to give much more than ten percent.²¹

6. Conclusion

Socialists in the mold of Cohen, and ones who appreciate the problems of information and coordination arising in large groups, should therefore be much more libertarian than has been heretofore appreciated. Where they will differ with typical libertarians, of course, is the extent to

²¹ MacAskill, *Doing Good Better*; Singer, *The Most Good You Can Do*. There is a live debate as to whether relations of justice hold only between citizens; see: Nagel, "The Problem of Global Justice"; Julius, "Nagel's Atlas."

which they recommend redistribution. Some libertarians may see redistribution as a mere moral prerogative, while others may acknowledge an imperfect moral duty of beneficence. Cohenite socialists, on the other hand, will accept much more demanding redistributive recommendations. But this renders their position not in tension with capitalism – for capitalism is neutral with respect to what moral principles of redistribution we should accept. Capitalism is merely a way of assigning control rights over objects – in particular, the allowance of maximally extensive feasible property rights, consistent with the rights of others.²² As such, it is compatible with a wide range of views as to what moral obligations we have to give to others. It is also compatible with a wide range of schemes of organization within productive firms, including those which incorporate democratic decision-making by the workers involved.

The socialist utopia is within grasp. But in contrast with traditional (mis)conceptions, it involves moving our institutions in the capitalist direction, while moving our motives in the direction of promoting greater equality of opportunity and community.

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²² See, for example: Gaus, “The Idea and Ideal of Capitalism”; Otteson, *The End of Socialism*.

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