

Why Not Socialism?

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Soviet Union collapsed, the Berlin Wall came down, millions were lifted out of oppression, and the Mises/Hayek critique of socialism was (supposedly) vindicated. As the world slogs through the continuing recession, however, dissenting voices grow louder. The late G. A. Cohen, an iconic political philosopher of the left who taught at Oxford University, offers one of those dissenting voices in *Why Not Socialism?* In this short book Cohen offers a defense of socialism that some will find superficially appealing, but he utterly fails to persuade. The case for socialism remains thoroughly refuted. Practically speaking Cohen and other socialists offer not an enlightened and superior moral system but a recipe for the destruction of civilization.

Cohen provides what he terms “a compelling preliminary case for socialism.” He proceeds to identify two desirable features of a camping trip—equality and community—and then asks readers to consider whether those principles don’t also make socialism desirable for whole societies. Later he discusses the feasibility of socialism but never responds to the criticisms made by Mises and Hayek. Cohen thus builds his case on a foundation that was blasted to rubble decades ago.

He argues (rightly, in my view) that few would like a camping trip in which every act of cooperation took place within formal markets and explains persuasively why personal relationships are not mediated through markets. I do not charge my children for attending to meals and bath time, nor do I expect to be paid for accepting dinner invitations. There certainly are degrees to which our daily affairs are organized along “socialist” principles, but that’s irrelevant to the economic critique of socialism, which concerns economic calculation in a complex society when the means of production are not privately owned. As Mises and Hayek have shown, such

calculation is impossible.

Arguments for socialism, Cohen's included, crumble when they fail to recognize the problems inherent in socialist production. In constructing his example of the camping trip, Cohen begins by assuming "facilities with which to carry out our enterprise: we have, for example, pots and pans, oil, coffee, fishing rods, canoes, a soccer ball, decks of cards, and so forth." The questions of what should be produced and how have just been assumed away. Cohen's hypothesized camping trip is also (I assume) voluntary, which is at odds with the coercive nature of socialism.

For Cohen socialism's problem is that designing production processes is difficult, but he thinks the problem can be solved by wise technicians and bookkeepers. Further, he seems not to understand the problems of competing claims to productive resources and competing ideas about what should be produced. Cohen doesn't say what he would do with people who don't wish to be reacquainted with their "species-essence," as Marx put it, by abandoning the market in favor of allegedly "natural" socialism. Most telling of all, he never mentions the mountains of corpses produced by those who tried to implement his vision in the twentieth century. How do we avoid "the worst getting on top," as Hayek put it?

Cohen calls the free market "a casino from which it is difficult to escape" and denounces the inequalities it produces. Markets, he contends, are based on greed and fear, but even if that charge were true, it isn't clear that centralized control of the means of production would be an improvement. The organization of production, as he sees it, is a question of overcoming greed and harnessing generosity. Only someone who knows nothing about the twentieth century could think that putting government officials in charge of the economy overcomes greed and harnesses generosity.

Cohen's misunderstanding of the market is also evident in his

discussion of people like doctors, nurses, and teachers, who he thinks are motivated by higher ideals than narrow self-interest (though doctors and teachers are represented by powerful lobbying groups aiming to increase their incomes). He writes, “. . . market signals are not necessary to decide what diseases to cure or what subjects to teach, nor are they efficient means of deciding that.” That simply isn’t true. Market signals are of utmost importance; without them, we cannot know whether to devote our next dollar or hour to AIDS eradication or cancer research.

The book leaves the impression that Cohen’s vision of social organization is one with an army of smiling New Socialist Men and Women accepting orders from a small coterie of philosopher-kings who are blessed with knowledge of The Very Best. In the final analysis Cohen’s attempted “compelling preliminary case for socialism” is neither compelling nor convincing. The book will make excellent grist for the mills of freshman seminars, but it collapses under the slightest scrutiny.

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Art Carden is an Associate Professor of Economics at Samford University’s Brock School of Business. In addition, he is a Senior Research Fellow with the Institute for Faith, Work, and Economics, a Senior Fellow with the Beacon Center of Tennessee, and a Research Fellow with the Independent Institute. He is a member of the FEE [Faculty Network](#). Visit his [website](#).

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