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**BOOK REVIEW: WHY NOT SOCIALISM?,  
BY G.A. COHEN, PRINCETON AND  
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“Why not socialism?” is Cohen’s leaflet-sized book on the topic of the social ideal. Structured in four chapters and a conclusion, the book is meant to gradually conduct the reader to one conclusion: that socialism and the “socialist aspiration” (Cohen 2009, p. 80) are not only desirable, but have the potential of becoming also feasible. The first chapter presents the thought experiment of “the camping trip”, from which the capitalist vs. socialist world dichotomy arises. After having constructed this context, Cohen considers it reasonable that all who engage in the thought experiment will “strongly favor a socialist form of life over feasible alternatives” (2000, p. 1). The second chapter elaborates on the principles realized by the camping trip: the egalitarian and community principle, two moral principles largely attributed to socialism, as Cohen understands it. Their main role is to show “why the camping trip mode of organization is attractive” (Cohen 2009, pp.1-2). Lastly, the final two chapters complete each other, discussing firstly on the matter of the desirability of the principle and, secondly, on the issue of its feasibility. Even though he concludes that it is not yet feasible, this fact does not take away from its desirability, such as my not being able to procure a shiny, fast car does not impeach its property of it still remaining desirable for me.

Before discussing G. A. Cohen’s theory on socialist equality of opportunity, his vision on the economic market and drawing some final thoughts, I consider that it is necessary to firstly elaborate on the context of the camping trip. Therefore, the trip is, at the very beginning, an enjoyable one among friends, who contribute, share their resources and help one another (Cohen 2009, p. 3-4). It describes a feeling of community, of unitary wholeness, the campers submitting to the two aforementioned moral principles of socialism: equality and community. As the trip progresses, one notes a change in the four friends’ behavior. Altruism aside, they now start demanding compensation, in return for employing their knowledge, skill, and craftsmanship for the benefit of the community (Cohen 2009, pp. 7-9). This, to Cohen, is an example of capitalist reasoning, where capitalism is the factor that tampers with the balance and harmony of the socialist world. Now, should one accept the argument that the camping trip was better when the four friends behaved and thought like socialists, then does this also mean that one automatically accepts socialism to be desirable?<sup>[1]</sup>

1 “Why not socialism?” can be read as a comparison between capitalism and socialism, where the latter is, in Cohen’s vision, clearly preferable to the former. For better clarity, it should be noted that the socialism he advocates for is not the socialism of the authoritarian regimes of the past century.

Throughout the book, Cohen upholds the concept of socialist equality of opportunity as being not only a principle of justice, but also the ideal of justice. Until now, his and Ronald Dworkin's theory (2002) are mostly alike – both support the idea in which social disadvantages are the result of unfair inequalities. The cut is drawn by the way they envision compensation. Socialist equality of opportunity is meant to mitigate and correct for any unchosen circumstances that lead to injustice, regardless if the individual identifies or not with his preferences deriving from it. Moreover, Cohen (2009, pp. 17-18) defends the idea that agents cannot be considered responsible for their social status or natural misfortune, the only differences taken into account being the ones arising from personal choice. “Why not socialism?” continues by dealing with the issue of option luck under socialist equality of opportunity. To Cohen, the inequalities preserved by option luck interfere with the balance created by the principle of community. Because in a community where the socialist ideal of justice prevails, no agent should fare better than his neighbor; differences created by lucky or unlucky choices engender selfishness and greed, as does capitalism.

I consider it important to pause and consider the issue of transmitting values and preferences from parent to child. To Cohen, children are to be compensated for genetic disadvantages (what he calls “natural powers and capacities”). I would ask: why not be compensated for their preferences and values as well? What if an agent, throughout his life, is not exposed to any other type of values than the ones his parents have instilled in her. Is she still responsible for her beliefs and preferences? Let us imagine the case of a child of a white supremacist, who has lived all his life in a hateful environment. All his life he has been taught, by people he trusted nonetheless, that only the white man should be granted control and power. Then, is the child to blame for believing this to be correct? Should he be held accountable, in his adult life, for holding racist beliefs, provided that he had never interacted with other kinds of individuals or stepped out of his small white supremacist community? Of course, the information is out there and we, as responsible citizens, have a moral duty to access it, but what if the child never learns of this free access to information? Of course, it is quite difficult to attempt to answer or solve the question at hand, seeing that Cohen strays from assessing the issue of responsibility, as opposed to Ronald Dworkin. For now, let us accept that genetics play an important role in the inheritance of natural or social disadvantages, as G.A. Cohen argues, and further consider the topic of the socialist ideal – the author's main aim in “Why not socialism?”.

G.A. Cohen's book then advances from the scope of socialist equality of opportunity to the means through which it could be attained. To Cohen, the problem resides in its design, in the lack of social infrastructure of the current world (2009, pp. 56-57). He argues that the market economy is an impediment to reaching the socialist ideal. Being based on greed (Cohen 2009, p. 40), the market only fuels the fear of having to succeed in order to lead a basic life, thus adding pressure on the second moral value, that of community. Exchanges should be made in the “spirit of commitment” (Cohen 2009, p. 41), and not on the expectation of compensation. Therefore, rejecting the economic market is instrumental to creating a socialist ethos and reaching egalitarian goals. This view is arguably attractive, but is it also adequate for the current world?

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Furthermore, why presume that everyone is or wishes to become a socialist?<sup>2</sup> If the achievement of a social ethos is the goal, how can it be fulfilled in a society as diverse as ours? Would it be morally acceptable to impose socialist values upon individuals? However, one should keep in mind the advantages of the proposed view on socialism, namely that it might enhance freedom and freedom of choice, for it has the potential to offer more valuable opportunities to a great number of individuals.

Finally, “Why not socialism?” succeeds in presenting an idealized vision of a socialist world, but ends before giving an account of how to create it. The faults of this work reside in the assumption that the feasibility and, even more so, desirability of socialism, as a moral ideal, are obvious to any reader going through the book front to back. However, I would argue that it is not so obvious and that, maybe, a more in-depth discussion on the finer points of socialism would have been advisable.

### References:

Cohen, G. A. (2009), *Why not socialism?*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Dworkin, R. (2002), *Sovereign Virtue*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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2 In his coda (2009, p. 80), Cohen holds that “politically serious people must take those obstacles (capitalist power and individual human selfishness) seriously.” Does this statement imply that, if one is not necessarily against capitalism, then one is not politically serious? Maybe not, but rather that politically serious capitalists should be aware and take into account those features of capitalism and human nature.