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A philosophical defense of market socialism

Review of Gerald A. Cohen, *Why not socialism?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009, 92 pages.

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Why Not Socialism?, whose title refers to Albert Einstein's "Why Socialism?" (*Monthly Review*, May 1949), was published a few months before its author died, 5th of August 2009, at the age of 68. This short book is an updated and substantially extended version of an article published a few years before (in Broadbent 2000, pp. 58-72). It puts an end to the long and rich career of the philosopher, which is mainly represented by the publication of the founding book on analytical Marxism (*Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, 1978) and by his major contributions to debates on self-ownership and left-wing libertarianism (*Self-ownership, freedom and equality*, 1995) as well as on social justice. Along with his two previous books, *If You're an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* (1999) and *Rescuing Justice and Equality* (2008) this book reflects his latest concern. The 2008 tome was part of a controversy over John Rawls' theory of justice, which he opposes for focusing on personal choices rather than on basic structures. Both books extend Jerry Cohen's long-lasting commitment to normative political philosophy.

Why Not Socialism? is worth of interest for everyone, including scholars and students in philosophy, social sciences, economics, interested in issues related to socialism and to social justice. It is a philosophical essay in defense of socialism as a mode of organization of social relations on the basis of the principles of equality and community. It is written in a very lucid and sometimes humorous prose, as Cohen always did. His defense is founded on the metaphor of the camping trip as an implementation of socialism. He first describes, with his habitual precision and rigor, the way in which the principles are laid down. He then wonders whether socialism is desirable and feasible and focuses especially on market socialism. This metaphor can be seen as a reminder of the communist summer camp, called Kinderland, where Cohen went as a child and a teenager. This camping is presented as small-scale socialism, with collective ownership and mutual planning, where individuals act in cooperation with each other towards the satisfaction of a common interest. They put the principles of equality and community into practice and they exclude market exchange and private ownership in order to preserve social cohesion. The kind of equality favoured by Cohen in this short book is the socialist equality of opportunity, as opposed to the bourgeois equality of opportunity (equality of rights) and the left-liberal equality of opportunity (equality of social circumstances). Socialist equality of opportunity allows a situation where non-chosen disadvantages are excluded, whether they are social or natural. Hence different levels of income between individuals are condemned only if they reflect individual preferences and do not correspond to significant differences in terms of satisfaction. But if socialist equality of opportunity is on its own, it allows three kinds of inequalities to prevail, which proceed from different preferences, from regrettable choices and from option luck. Only the first kind is acceptable from the point of view of socialism. That is why the principle of equality, even of the most radical kind, as presented by Cohen, must be complemented by the principle of community, which refers to mutual responsibility and cooperation among individuals.

Having explained the principles upon which socialism has to be founded, Cohen wonders whether socialism, notably the spreading of these principles on a national and international scale, is desirable and, more importantly, feasible. This desirability would depend on the ability of everybody to treat everybody else with a level of reciprocity that can be found in friendship. The issue of feasibility is more complicated, because of the difficulty of spreading these principles on a large scale, for two reasons that are related to the limits of human nature and social technology. Cohen claims that even if we can assume that a society founded on human generosity exists, the main difficulty would still be that we do not have any organizational

technology, namely the mode through which socialism could be organized. “Our problem is that, while we know how to make an economic system work on the basis of development, and, indeed, the hypertrophy, of selfishness, we do not how to make it work by developing and exploiting human generosity” (p. 58). That is the reason why it is necessary to design models of socialism. With this goal in mind, Cohen bases his views on two restrictive assumptions. On the one hand, he criticizes “nineteenth-century socialists” (p. 66) when he claims that historical experience does not allow a generalized central planning to be feasible, supposedly with reference to the Soviet and Chinese experiences. On the other hand, he assumes that the market motives of greed and fear, no matter how repugnant they are, are the “easiest way to generate productivity” (p. 76). His argument relies explicitly on two books (Carens, 1981, and Roemer, 1994) in discussing the benefits of market socialism. He wonders whether it might be possible to implement market socialism in such a way that the efficiency of market – based on its information function – is preserved and that market incentives – greed and fear – are excluded, together with the resulting unequal distribution. Market mechanisms would then be used to solve the problem of social technology on the behalf of equality and community. Yet he admits that less importance would here be given to these two principles than in traditional socialism, but he claims that they would still exist thanks to the development of a strong Welfare State and to the extended distribution of basic income. Still, for Cohen market socialism fulfills the socialist standards of capitalism better, even if it does less, than “the full socialist ideal” (p. 75). He favors market socialism because of its stronger feasibility, even if he admits being “agnostic” (p. 76) about the possibility of achieving socialism, namely the full existence of the free operation of personal choices on a large scale within the constraints of equality and community.

He concludes, by referring to Einstein, that socialism is humanity’s attempt “to overcome and advance beyond the predatory phase of human development” and he thinks that, even if humanity has up to now not succeeded in achieving it, the fight should not now be given up. Cohen’s book treats, with elegance and virtuosity, philosophical issues that are both major and urgent. They are especially urgent within the context of the hardening contradictions of capitalism and the developing global economic crisis, especially in so far as its deadly outcome for the world population is concerned. Still, we may wonder whether the ambitions of Cohen’s book suffer from some limitations that are due to the illusion that it is not possible to go beyond the market – he does not refer to capitalism – and that humanity has to deal with it. Such an illusion has been severely attacked and condemned by Marxists in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. It seems then that Cohen’s socialism, having given up the possibility of successfully achieving Marx’s catch-phrase, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!” as it appears in *The German Ideology* and *Critique of the Gotha Program*, can be presented as some adaptive preference due to the cost of “full” socialism that is judged too high.

It must be added that if the consistency between his first book, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*, and now *Why not socialism?* is not immediately clear, we can see that both are ahistorical, and that the collapse of Cohen’s illusions about a deterministic law of history has to do with his claim in *Self-ownership and equality* (p. 7) that “history has shredded [Marx’s] predictions”. He was thus led to turn to the search of moral values for advocating socialism, which he confirms in *If you’re an egalitarian, how come you’re so rich?* (1999). He claims there (p. 43) “that socialists must abandon the [Marxian] obstetric conception, and that they must, in some measure, be utopian designers”. Jerry Cohen’s long journey, which recently came to an end, had been a continuous search for intellectual tools in the service of social transformation. Cohen

became a “utopian designer”. Such a position can be seen as a break with the Hegelian method, probably under the influence of John Roemer, for whom exploitation does not have to do with the extraction of surplus labour, but with social injustice. Normative issues became his priority in the early 1990s. Referring to his debate with John Rawls’ *Theory of Justice*, the issue was then to strike a balance between personal rights and social duties. In doing so, he acknowledged John Roemer’s conclusion: “*It is not at all clear how analytical Marxists will differ from non-Marxist philosophers like Ronald Dworkin and Amartya Sen*” (1986, p. 191).

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