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Presentation Title: “A Critique of G. A. Cohen’s Egalitarian Socialism”

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My presentation can be divided into two parts. First up, I will introduce Jerry Cohen and his famous “Camping Trip” model, upon which he bases his argument for the fundamental moral principles of an ideal socialism. His two basic principles are 1) socialist equality of opportunity and 2) community. From these principles, one readily concludes that the capitalist model is bad. Cohen then considers extending the model to a large scale. He admits that he is not sure about the feasibility of his egalitarian socialism, particularly with respect to the “calculation problems” involved in determining what to produce and how much, and how to distribute these goods. Inspecting his theoretical logic and model structure, I will give a critique in the second part of my presentation.

**Introduction**

G. A. Cohen, universally known as Jerry Cohen, is a famous British analytical Marxist. He was born into a Jewish Marxist family in 1941. His mother was a communist party member and an activist. His growth, his family, his Jewishness, and his need to position his own beliefs in relation to Marx and to Soviet Communism were central to his life and philosophical work. After publishing his first book, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defense,* in 1978, he acquired a great reputation in the academic field. However, he gradually diverted his focus from Marx to “socialist moral philosophy,” in order to answer the libertarian Robert Nozick on questions of self-ownership and freedom. In 1995, the book *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* was issued as a reply to Nozick. For the rest of his academic career, he focused on equality, justice and democracy, spending the majority of his time and energy arguing with Robert Nozick, Gerald Dworkin and John Rawls. A series of books, *History, Labor, and Freedom*” in 1988, *If You Are an Egalitarian, How Come You Are So Rich?* in 2001, and *Rescuing Justice and Freedom* in 2008, came out to clarify his political thought about moral principles and egalitarian socialism. Cohen died on August 5, 2009. His last book, *Why Not Socialism?* was published after his death. In this very short book, which garnered considerable academic attention, Cohen hopes to evoke an appealing socialist ideal, which opposes in principle private property, market exchange and a capitalist economic organization.

**Part 1**

Due to the limited time, my presentation will focus on his last book *Why Not Socialism?* to clarify his egalitarian socialism through the camping trip model and point out the weaknesses in his arguments. Since 1980s, especially after the collapse of Soviet Union, the revolutionary awareness of the working class had become more and more weak. The failure of the socialist project in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has made people lose interest in socialism. Facing this serious situation, as a Marxist, Cohen attempted to highlight the crucial moral principles, such as equality and community to enhance and attract the public’s confidence in socialism and demonstrate that communism is superior to capitalism.

**The Socialist Camping Trip**

Cohen asks us to imagine an ideal camping trip. He asserts that when friends go together on a camping trip, a spirit of fraternity or camaraderie prevails. For the duration of the trip, items of gear are not treated as private property, but as commonly owned. Everyone wants everyone to have a great time. Food and goods are shared freely. He then asks us to imagine a camping trip where the campers interacted according to capitalist principles. Due to private ownership and differing personal abilities, people begin to act in a selfish way, and conflicts happened. Harry demands extra food because he is especially good at fishing. Sylvia finds an abundant apple tree and wants to do less work in return for sharing the fruit. Leslie demands payment for her special knowledge of how to crack nuts. Morgan finds a pond dug by his father, and claims ownership of the fish. Cohen concludes that all of us would find the socialist camping trip much more attractive and desirable than the capitalist one.

Cohen sees two moral principles underlying the socialist camping trip: a principle of “socialist equal opportunity” and a principle of “community.” The first one is fulfilled when (a) each individual has the opportunity to be as well off as anyone else, and (b) if any individual becomes worse off than others, the worse off individual can reasonably be held responsible for that outcome. This formal equality of opportunity eliminates inequalities resulting from underserved advantages or disadvantages, such as class status, inborn abilities and other circumstances not due to personal choice. This principle still allows significant inequalities if such inequalities arise from bad choices or brute luck.

However, the *second* principle, the principle of community, can require compensation to reduce or eliminate the inequalities that socialist equality of opportunity tolerates. The community principle includes two aspects, a) caring for one another and b) communal reciprocity. The first aspect is that each person cares about every other person, and in particular cares that no one be significantly worse off than others in terms of fundamental life prospects. The second aspect is to aim for a society where each individual is moved to serve the others with whom she is interacting, not to gain a benefit for herself, but in order to fulfill their needs, and where each individual expects the others to be similarly motivated. Cohen argues that these latter values--serving others and being one served by others-- is different from market reciprocity. Market reciprocity requires payment and treats service only as a means to personal enrichment. Market reciprocity is essentially a form of *greed* (gain profit) and *fear* (avoid loss).

Cohen’s ethical principles, which are reflected in his socialist camping trip model, should be, he thinks, the principles of any truly socialist system. But would such a system be feasible? Can the camping trip be extended to society as a whole. Cohen admits that he doesn’t know for sure, but he insists that we do *not* know that such a system is impossible. He does not think “human nature” stands in the way. “Our problem,” he says, “is not, primarily, human selfishness, but our lack of a suitable organizational technology: our problem is a problem of design.” (57-8) He is especially critical of “certain contemporary overenthusiastic market socialists . . . who forget that the market is intrinsically repugnant.” (78) Cohen admits that he does not *know* that his ideal is feasible on a national scale, but “I do not think that we now know that we will never know how to do these things. I am agnostic on that score.” (76)

**Part 2**

Let us inspect Cohen’s ideal socialist model. I think it has some serious flaws. First of all, there are the ethical values themselves advocated by Cohen. According to most moral theories, people have special obligations towards friends and family that they do not have towards strangers. It is a dispute in moral theory about the demandingness of our obligations to our fellows as well as whether morality permits us to give partial preference to those close to us. Though Cohen may respond that principle of community is not meant to articulate a duty, but an ideal, it seems excessively utopian and romantic. This being so, can it really enhance the public’s curiosity of socialism or will it only confirm public perception off socialism is utterly unrealistic and unworthy of serious attention?

There’s also Cohen’s view that all market competition as bad, based on a combination of greed and fear. Cohen worries that markets cause us to regard each other as mere instruments to satisfy our own needs. He says that capitalism encourages us to regard others as competitors in the market and as means to enrich ourselves. It is terrible to regard other people as enemies or mere resources. However, to me, this seems to be an excessively negative way to view others. When people encounter each other in the market, they do so primarily as potential traders. They can respect for one another, and recognize each other as having right to say “no” and walk away. In my eyes, they may use their profit in different ways, such as improving their own lives, giving aid to the community, or even giving aid to needy strangers.

We can also ask, what is wrong with honoring those who have higher skills, or make significant innovative contributions by granting them greater share of goods? To be sure, care must be taken that inequalities don’t become too large, but is if everyone has enough, should we begrudge those who are granted a bit more than enough? Shouldn’t we take more seriously Marx’s critique of “crude, unthinking communism” that is only the fulfillment of *envy* and leveling on the basis of a preconceived minimum”?[[1]](#footnote-1)

Moreover, in a democratic enterprise, workers work conscientiously for the *collective*  good of the enterprise, not just their own self-centered good. And can’t they admire a competitor that creates a better product or a better way of organizing production, and seek to emulate their more successful rival? In athletic competition, is the desire for victory motivated only by greed and fear, or isn’t there also often genuine admiration for the skills of one’s more successful opponents? Is all *economic* competition ethically problematic?

Now let us turn to the feasibility question. Cohen’s model involves cooperation on the part of everybody and requires everybody to regard all others as friends. Long ago John Stuart Mill raised concern that some version of socialist economic organization might be suitable for small groups of competent and virtuous agents, but would be ruined by extension across the entire society, since in that case the entire spectrum of economic agents (including malcontents, free-riders, cheats, and exploiters) would be expected to live up to the high standard of conduct required by socialist ideals.[[2]](#footnote-2) It would be unwise to organize the economy as one big pot from which people may take what they think they need and to which they may contribute what they think they ought to contribute according to their own lights, freely and spontaneously. This dream of voluntary, frictionless social cooperation might well become a nightmare. Indeed, such a socialist organization of economic activity is compatible with massive monitoring and surveillance. We have moved a long way in thought from the camping trip model.

We should also note that Cohen ‘s argument against capitalism is unfair, because it makes the wrong kind of comparison. It compare ideal to real rather than ideal to ideal and real to real. Cohen claims that actors in market societies are motivated by greed and fear. He is right, many of them are. What are people motivated by in socialist societies? When he says agents in a socialist society are motivated by community spirit, he is discussing an imaginary and fictional socialist society. Because Cohen’s camping trip is fictional, he simply stipulate that the character in his model have whatever motivations he likes. He is not doing social science and helping to discover what actually motivates people in different regimes. He is not showing us how different regimes changes people’s motivations. It is empirical questions and cannot be settled by conceptual analysis.

One could just as easily say that even if market-based societies fail to meet Cohen’s favored standards of equality and community, they do a far better job of protecting liberty, promoting welfare, and securing social justice than any other economic systems we have attempted. Look at Chinese market socialism. To be sure, it is far from perfect, but who could have imagined a country much poorer and underdeveloped in 1949 than Russia was in 1917 is now the second largest economy in the world? The introduction of market mechanisms have played an undeniable role here. We should be clear about that magnitude of these successes. For example, according to World Bank figures, China had nearly a billion of its citizens living on less than $2/day in 1981, more than 80% of its population. By 2010 the number had dropped to less than 400 million. In fact, the *entire* decline is world poverty during that period, some 68 million people in all, was due to China. Without China, global poverty would have *increased* during that period by 500 million.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Did nor the market not make a big difference in China? Are Chinese all selfish and greed? It is not reasonable to object market simply.

**Conclusion:**

Rethinking Cohen’s egalitarian socialism theory, I admire his endeavor to explore a possible method to enhance the appeal of socialism. But, as I have indicated, I find the values he takes to be definitive of ideal socialism to be problematic. I have also argued that he should have been more concerned about the feasibility issues and not just engage on conceptual analysis. Cohen argues that the principles that are implemented in the camping trip model cannot be implemented to any degree in an economy organized around market exchange and private ownership, since markets are based on greed and fear. But he is not sure whether embracing moral values and abolishing market can achieve the socialist ideal. But if genuine socialism requires adherence to the so-called perfect moral principles advocated by Cohen, and if no one can yet show that implementing these principles on a large scale *is* feasible (despite repeated attempts in both theory and practice to do so), then socialism would hardly find its appearance enhanced.

1. Marx, 1844 Manuscripts, “Private Property and Communism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John, Stuart Mill, Principles of Political Economy and Chapters on Socialism, ed. Jonathan Riley, Oxford University Press, 1994, 423-25 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Figures from John Ross, “Key Trends in Globalization,” November 13, 2013: http://ablog.typepad.com/keytrendsinglobalisation/2013/11/china-world-poverty.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)