

BOOK REVIEW

G.A. Cohen. 2009. *Why Not Socialism?* Princeton: Princeton University Press. ISBN 978-0-691-14361-3. Cloth: 17.95 CAD. Pages: 83.

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This book was the last thing published by G.A. Cohen (or Jerry Cohen as he called himself) before his sudden death at age 68 from a stroke in August. It was not the last book written by him, as a version first appeared in 2001 in *Democratic Equality: What Went Wrong?* edited by Ed Broadbent.

This pamphlet-sized monograph (small pages, large type, no notes) is reminiscent of writings in the 1930s and 40s of the Left Book Club in the UK. Like its publications, written by such as G.D.H. Cole, R.H. Tawney, and J.B.S Haldane, we have a renowned scholar producing an accessible, concise work addressing a vital topic from a committed, progressive standpoint: would that more of today's academic star scholars would follow this example. If the holder of the Chichele Chair at Oxford University, previously occupied by Charles Taylor, John Plamenatz, and Isaiah Berlin, can expend energy on this sort of writing, so can they.

To say that the book is accessible is not to say that it is unsophisticated. Again as in texts of the Left Book Club, such as Cole's *An Intelligent Man's Guide Through World Chaos*, Cohen does not write down to his readers. Instead he brings his considerable talents as a philosopher in the 'Analytic' tradition to the task of defending socialism. (Thanks mainly to his first book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford University Press, 1978), Cohen is considered a leading 'Analytic Marxist,' but this designation has a broad and a narrow meaning. Cohen's work is analytic in the sense of close attention to definition and fine-grained argumentation. He is not an Analytic Marxist in the narrow sense of Jon Elster or John Roemer, who attempt to reinterpret Marxism in terms of rational choice theory; though he is not hostile to them and in *Why Not Socialism?* refers to Roemer in defending market socialism.)

The book begins by explicating Cohen's notion of socialism starting with the nice device of attending to the values exhibited by people on a camping trip, where two stand out: a commitment to equality, as in allotting work and food, and a spirit of community. Society-wide socialism is similar in being motivated by and structured to promote these values.

Socialist equality, like left liberal equality, is equality of opportunity (rather than of outcomes), but it differs in compensating for native inequalities of talent as well as those of circumstance. Even this sort of equality of opportunity cannot rule out some unequal distributions, but these are prohibited in the name of preserving community spirit and cooperation.

The remainder of the book defends first the desirability and then the feasibility of socialism. Cohen thinks it almost self-evident that the egalitarian and community values of the campers are desirable motivations. An attempt by one of the campers to corner a market on camping tools or to hoard would be seen by almost anyone to be morally objectionable. Those who think that non- or anti-egalitarian or community values are unavoidable in a large society should at least agree that these attitudes are no less morally deficient there than in the camping trip, so their objection is to feasibility.

Cohen defends the feasibility of socialism by criticizing two main grounds for denying it: that people are by nature selfish and that there are no viable means for organizing an economy on socialist principles: 'while we know how to make an economic system work on the basis of the development...of selfishness [the capitalist market], we do not know how to make it work by developing and exploiting human generosity' (58). Since there are so many examples of people who do not act in entirely selfish ways (he mentions doctors, nurses, and teachers), Cohen turns most of his attention to the second ground. He grants that '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 similarly ordered states' (75-6). However both the welfare state and market socialism hold out promise, and Cohen mainly discusses the latter.

Some enthusiasts of Cohen's 1978 book on Marx see a subsequent rejection of Marxism and a turn toward utopian-socialist moral exhortation. Cohen's evolution, however, was more complex and less dramatic than portrayed. In 1988 he published a collection of essays, *History, Labour, and Freedom* (Oxford University Press) that defended some classic Marxist theses and offered friendly reformulations of others. Here and in the earlier work Cohen saw Marxism as primarily an empirical theory of history rather than a system of values, and, as argued at length in his last major work, *Rescuing Justice & Equality* (Harvard University Press, 2008), he did not think that moral theories could be based on empirical ones (ch. 6). From the late 1980s, when he was writing articles that constituted *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), Cohen maintained that having recognized that the creation of

a revolutionary working-class is not historically inevitable, socialists 'must engage in more moral advocacy than used to be fashionable' with the aim of helping to instill an egalitarian ethic into people's everyday lives (p. 9). In his last book he cites Marx (in 'On the Jewish Question') as offering a superior perspective to that of liberals like John Rawls on the importance of success in such engagement (1-2).

A constant throughout was a steadfast commitment to socialism, and this not just in Cohen's adult career but also his youth. As he explains in *Self-Ownership* (ch. 11), he was raised in a Montreal working-class Communist family and was active in the Communist Party's youth organization. Unless he differed from all other Canadian kids, he almost certainly also went to camp each summer, which would have been a camp run by the left-wing Montreal Jewish community. This would put the story of the camping trip as a paradigmatic example of socialism in a special light. When I first read the story I noted to myself that I must ask my friend about this the next time we saw each other. Sadly, that time will not now come.