**Justifying Socialism: G.A. Cohen’s Critiques from the Left**

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Which sort of camping trip sounds better: one in which private ownership and private goals prevail, where participants are committed to maximizing their own enjoyment and only share their personal possessions on their own terms, or one in which the facilities allowing for a successful camping trip are held and used collectively and where each is committed to each participant enjoying the camping trip? This is the question that Cohen asks us to consider at the beginning of his persuasive pamphlet “Why Not Socialism?” Immediately we can think to our pre-existing ideas of what camping trips consist in; if one of our compatriots were to refuse use of her private fishing rod without demanding a fee we would certainly say that she was not acting in the spirit of the trip. We enjoy sharing and we abhor the market in the camping trip context. Why don’t these obvious principlesextend to our everyday lives?

The socialism of G.A. Cohen revolves in large part about the principle of community, stipulated to obtain when “people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another” (Cohen 2009, 34). This principle serves often to limit inequalities, even those which result from freely made choices and involving “option-luck”, or egalitarian-speak for calculated risks such as lotteries. A rich person and a poor person, for example, will not share a communal relationship because the poor person can easily observe that his wealthy would-be comrade does not care enough about his destitution to help him out, and, further, neither will relate to the other because their lives consist in such vastly different abilities to enjoy, sustain, and protect themselves that they essentially live in “different worlds” (Hodgson 27). Community then, cannot obtain under capitalist markets, and our society would be so markedly different if organized according to Cohen’s principles.

Questions can easily arise about occupation: can a train station cleaner and an architect ever find themselves in community when the latter gets to partake in intellectually stimulating work while the former sweeps up others’ litter under greater physical strain? Cohen notes that occupations with special labor burdens should receive higher remuneration. In my view, the community principle’s limits on social stratification can allow for the survival of those jobs we presently see as wholly undesirable in that the principle overhauls all of our relationships to one another. Whereas under our present division of labor the least desirable positions are marshalled to the worst-off in society *per force*, there is no such coercion under the community principle, as individuals care about each other and care that they care about each other. I, then, do not look at a train station cleaner with disdain or even pity, because I know that he is satisfied with his labor-leisure arrangement *and* because I am *thankful that he is doing me and my comrades a beneficial social service*.Similarly, he recognizes the benefit which he is conferring on his fellow citizens by providing us with a clean train station and is appreciative that I am thankful. I do not evade his gaze and a throw my tissues on the floor, but rather engage him as my equal (“good morning, comrade!”) and do my best to diminish his labor burden by responsibly disposing of my litter.

Examining Cohen’s socialism is and has been a paradigm-shifting experience; Cohen reorients our intuitions and commonplace liberal ideas to reveal a fiercely egalitarian conception of justice. Why, he asks, do we simply allow the wealthy to demand an incentive (such as tax breaks) *for themselves* in order to create jobs or up production? Surely this is nothing more than allowing horrible selfishness with a veneer of sociological, factual reality, and Cohen rejects the justice in any group’s ability to refer to their own chosen actions so impersonally and without any responsibility. (Cohen 2008, 151-180). The thrust of Cohen’s socialism, then, is that we must abandon the jargon of incentives and poorly ‘justified’ vast inequalities of wealth in favor of imagining a better world where we expect people to act not only in their own interest but in the interest of all, and where people are truly motivated to do so. The research process has been tougher than I expected, with endless loose ends and brick walls. Synthesizing Cohen’s critiques and observations with the rest of my political philosophy education and into my life as a citizen will be an infinitely interesting and probably lifelong project.

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