

**Jason F. Brennan.** *Why Not Capitalism?* Routledge 2014. 114 pp. \$140.00 USD (Hardback ISBN 9780415732963); \$28.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780415732970)

Some readers will correctly infer from this book's title (as well as its cover design) that Jason Brennan is responding to G. A. Cohen's *Why Not Socialism?* (Princeton University Press, 2009). Cohen's book is a brief and accessible argument for the claim that socialism is morally superior to capitalism as an economic order. Many who defend capitalism argue that socialism is simply unfeasible. Cohen addresses that issue, but he tries to refocus the argument on the normative question, which he thinks is more pressing: which system, socialism or capitalism, best accords with justice and offers a more attractive vision for social life? That seems like safer ground for socialists, even according to their opponents who often grant that socialism would work just fine for hypothetical morally perfect people.

Brennan is not convinced. Rather than retreating to generalizations from failed socialist experiments, he pursues the more ambitious and interesting goal of showing that, in fact, capitalism is *morally* superior to socialism (although he also thinks capitalism is more practically feasible). He does so in three ways. First, Brennan points out a critical flaw in Cohen's case for socialism. Second, he argues that even residents of a utopian society would embrace capitalism. Third, he shows that capitalism allows the attainment of the values that would seem unique to socialism.

The critical flaw in Cohen's argument is that he compares an ideal version of socialism with real incarnations of capitalism, so he is not making a fair 'apples to apples' comparison. Brennan is correct in this criticism; Cohen simply stipulates that capitalism rewards, encourages, and depends on attitudes and emotions such as greed and fear. It is more than a little frustrating to see such an esteemed philosopher commit a blatant straw man fallacy, especially when at other points in the book he demonstrates such precise reasoning, as when he helpfully delineates various kinds of equality.

Pointing out Cohen's flaw is easy enough. But the *way* Brennan does so makes his book a treat to read. Cohen grounds his argument in an imaginary camping trip scenario, in which several people delight in sharing their resources, labor, and responsibilities. He contrasts these campers' actions and attitudes with capitalist ones that are selfish and callous. In response, Brennan gives a note-by-note parody of Cohen's imaginary camping trip, done in such a way as to not only reveal Cohen's straw man but also to show how Cohen's socialist aspirations are actually better realized in capitalism than in socialism itself.

The parody follows Cohen's narrative and argumentative structure and even directly appropriates some of his language. Instead of a camping trip, however, Brennan imagines a scenario from the children's television program, *The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*. Mickey Mouse and the other Disney characters live peacefully and happily in a little village, each holding private property and disposing of it as they wish while offering free exchange of various goods and services their neighbors find valuable. Much of their interaction occurs in the context of a free market, and yet the characters often cheerfully act in prosocial ways that are not aimed at individual profit. Thus, their community expresses values like beneficence, reciprocity, and even social justice. Brennan then offers a contrast with a socialist version of the Clubhouse village that features some of the

most dysfunctional and brutal episodes from twentieth century communism; he even includes a couple of truly odious direct quotations from V. I. Lenin.

As Brennan points out, the conclusion to be drawn from these two versions of *The Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* is fairly trivial: ideal capitalism is preferable to the horrors of actual socialism. But that is precisely the problem with Cohen's case for socialism: it is all too easy to show that a utopian socialist vision is preferable to the Dickensian nightmare version of capitalism. To achieve something more than an empty victory—that is, to truly determine which system is morally superior to the other—we need to make the right comparison. We need to compare idealized versions of both systems, and then perhaps we need to compare some of the actual versions as well.

The second part of Brennan's case, then, is to show that capitalism is preferable to socialism from a plausible moral point of view even when comparing only idealized versions. Much of his work on this score involves offering reasons why even morally exemplary agents would still choose a system that allows the private ownership of property. One such reason is that it would simply be more expedient if people were allowed to own various resources, rather than having to check with everyone else to see if anyone was using or planning to use them first. But a more explicitly moral (rather than practical) reason is that having our own property (and having economic freedom of trade) best allows us to pursue the projects that we value as individuals, i.e., those activities that give our lives purpose and meaning. Often we value particular relationships toward property itself; it matters to a guitarist not just that he have ready access to any old guitar but that he has *his particular* guitar.

Many readers will naturally wonder whether Brennan's envisioned utopia is too good to be true—that is, *too ideal*. To head off objections of this sort, he includes some preliminary empirical work that suggests that capitalism actually is correlated with (and dependent on and rewarding of) various prosocial attitudes, like fairness and trust (66-9). The citation of this work enriches the discussion, and it illustrates how the ideal is never completely divorced from the real in political philosophy.

The emphasis on economic freedom then provides the basis for the third stage of his argument. A capitalist system allows for people to combine their economic freedom with freedom of association in order to organize themselves in whatever way they wish, so long as their association is voluntary and does not wrongly interfere with the freedoms of others. That means that, in a capitalist utopia, any would-be socialist who wishes may team up with like-minded people to establish a socialist commune as a kind of island within the broader capitalist ocean. Thus, capitalism allows the attainment of both kinds of ideals—capitalist, and socialist. The converse is not true, however: a socialist system would not allow capitalist experiments in its midst.

Even if Brennan is correct on this point, though, he still is considering a scenario in which the economic system itself is capitalist. The communes would be allowed, but for the socialists within them they would be little more than consolation prizes (which is not to say that they are worthless). They would enjoy the freedom to practice small-scale socialism, but that might not be recognizably 'socialist' for them, much as state-sanctioned Christianity in the People's Republic of China is no longer recognizably Christian to many practitioners of that religion. Socialism, one

might argue, must be instituted on a society level in order to count. Still, insofar as capitalism allows for small-scale socialism at all, it does seem to have an advantage over socialism.

And yet, one might still suspect that there is a false dilemma here. Might it not be preferable to have some blend of particular elements of socialism and capitalism? For example, a society of morally exemplary agents could allow people to own a certain amount of private property, while reserving a substantial amount of collectively-owned property and offering publicly-provided services as a means of expressing their commitment to a sense of community. It might also establish rules that take some kinds of exchange out of the free market entirely, such as between caring professions and those who need their services. Would morally perfect agents prefer either pure capitalism or pure socialism over this option?

That question may turn on how one conceives of the relationship between members of a sizeable society—people not bound by immediate kinship but who nevertheless share *some* form of social connection, such as a neighborhood or city or nation. If such people are not literally some kind of family, despite socialist rhetoric about brotherhood, they nevertheless may have some richer notion of community than simple shared humanity—they are not mere strangers. It seems crass and selfish to agree to loan your neighbor a needed tool only if he offers sufficient payment. And Brennan's utopian residents often voluntarily engage in non-market exchange (they help their neighbors). But why would they not then choose to set up some socialist-style provisions toward this end while leaving intact a broader capitalist system? Would doing so be inconsistent with utopia?

Brennan's book has many of the same virtues as Cohen's. He writes engagingly and clearly; the book will be accessible to students and non-specialists. Given their length and style, the two books would make excellent companion pieces for a course in political philosophy or ethics or even economics. One need not have previously read *Why Not Socialism?* to understand and appreciate *Why Not Capitalism?*, although anyone interested in determining which author makes the better argument will certainly want to read both.

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