

WHY NOT SOCIALISM?

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Summary

The question that forms the title of this chapter is not intended rhetorically. The chapter begins by presenting what I believe to be a compelling *preliminary* case for socialism, and I then ask why that case might be thought to be *merely* preliminary, why, that is, it might, in the end, be defeated.

To summarize more specifically: Section 1 describes a context, called “the camping trip”, a context in which most people would, the author thinks, strongly favor a socialist mode of organization over feasible alternatives.

Section 2 specifies two principles, one of equality and one of community, that are realized on the camping trip, and whose realization explains why the camping trip mode of organization is attractive. Section 3, which is brief, asks whether those principles also make (society-wide) socialism *desirable*.

More attention is devoted (in Section 4) to whether socialism is *feasible*, by discussing difficulties that face the project of promoting socialism’s principles not in the mere small, as on a camping trip, but throughout society as a whole.

Section 5 then offers an excursus on market socialism, which is commended as a good second-best in response to the difficulties of implementing the ideals of socialism

(proper) Market socialist enthusiasts who believe market socialism to be more than a good second-best are criticized. Section 6 is a short coda

1. The Camping Trip

You and I and a whole bunch of other people go on a camping trip. There is no hierarchy among us; our common aim is that each of us should have a good time, doing, so far as possible, the things that he or she likes best (some of those things we do together; others we do individually). We have facilities with which to carry out our enterprise: we have, for example, pots and pans, oil, coffee, fishing rods, canoes, a soccer ball, decks of cards, and so forth. And, as is usual on camping trips, we avail ourselves of those facilities collectively: even if they are privately owned things, they are under collective control for the duration of the trip, and we have shared understandings about who is going to use them when, and under what circumstances, and why. Somebody fishes, somebody else prepares the food, and another person cooks it. People who hate cooking but enjoy washing up may do all the washing up, and so on. There are plenty of differences, but our mutual understandings, and the spirit of the enterprise, ensure that there are no inequalities to which anyone could mount a principled objection.

It is commonly true on camping trips, and on certain small-scale projects of other kinds, that we cooperate within a concern that, so far as is possible, everybody has a roughly similar opportunity to flourish. In these contexts most people, even most *anti*-egalitarians, accept, indeed, take for granted, a norm of equality. So deeply do most people take it for granted that there is no occasion to question it: to question it would contradict the spirit of the trip.

You could imagine a camping trip where everybody asserts her rights over the pieces of equipment, and the talents, that she brings, and where bargaining proceeds with respect to who is going to pay what to whom to be allowed, for example, to use a knife to peel the potatoes, and how much he is going to charge others for those now peeled potatoes which he bought in an unpeeled condition from another camper, and so on. You could base a camping trip on the principles of market exchange and strictly private ownership of the required facilities. (And one could also, of course, base a camping trip partly on collective and partly on private ownership, but that significant complication will not be addressed here.)

Now, most people would hate that. Most people would be more drawn to the first kind of camping trip than to the second, primarily on grounds of fellowship, but also, be it noted, on grounds of efficiency. (I have in mind the inordinate transaction costs that would attend a market-style camping trip.) And this means that most people are drawn to the socialist ideal, at least in certain restricted settings.

To reinforce this point, here are some conjectures about how most people would react in various imaginable camping scenarios:

- a) Harry loves fishing, and Harry is very good at fishing. Consequently, he brings back more fish than others do. Harry says: “It’s unfair, how we’re running things. I

should have better fish when we dine. I should have only perch, not the mix of perch and catfish that we've all been having". But his fellow campers say: "Oh, for heaven's sake, Harry, don't be such a shmuck. You sweat and strain no more than the rest of us do. So, you're very good at fishing. We don't begrudge you that special endowment, which is, quite properly, a source of satisfaction to you, but why should we *reward* that pre-eminence?"

- b) Following a three-hour time-off-for-personal-exploration period, an excited Sylvia returns to the campsite and announces: "I've found a huge apple tree, full of perfect apples". "Great !", others exclaim, "now we can all have apple sauce, and apple pie, and apple strudel!" "Provided, of course", so Sylvia rejoins, "that you reduce my labor burden, and/or furnish me with more room in the tent, and/or with more bacon at breakfast". Her claim to (a kind of) ownership of the tree revolts the others, but exactly such a claim, expressed or implicit, is, of course, at the heart of the constitution of private property: private property renews itself, every day, because such a claim is enforced, and/or accepted.
- c) Morgan recognizes the camp-site. "Hey, this is where my father camped thirty years ago. This is where he dug a special little pond on the other side of that hill, and stocked it with specially good fish. Dad knew I might come camping here one day, and he did all that so that I could eat better when I'm here. Great! Now I can have better food than you guys have".

The rest frown, or smile, at Morgan's greed.

Of course, not everybody likes camping trips. I do not myself enjoy them much, because I'm not outdoorsy, or, at any rate, I'm not outdoorsy overnight-wise. There's a limit to the outdoorsiness to which an urban Jew can be expected to submit: I'd rather have my communism in the warmth of All Souls College than in the wet of the Laurentians, and I love modern plumbing. But the question I'm asking is not: wouldn't you like to go on a camping trip? but: isn't this, the socialist way, with collective property and planned mutual giving, rather obviously the *right* way to run a camping trip, whether or not you actually *like* camping?

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Biographical Sketch

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