
WHY NOT SOCIALISM?

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CONTENTS

- I The Camping Trip
 - II The Principles Realized on
the Camping Trip
 - III Is the Ideal Desirable?
 - IV Is the Ideal Feasible? Are
the Obstacles to It Human
Selfishness, or Poor Social
Technology?
 - V Coda
- Acknowledgment*

THE QUESTION that forms the title of this short book is not intended rhetorically. I begin 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: I try to see how well the preliminary case stacks up on further reflection.

To summarize more specifically: In Part I, I describe a context, called "the camping trip," in which most people would, I think, strongly favor a socialist form of life over feasible alternatives. Part II specifies two principles, one of equality and one of community, that are realized on the camping trip, and whose realization explains, so I believe, why the camping trip mode of organization is attrac-

tive. In Part III, I ask whether those principles also make (society-wide) socialism *desirable*. But I also ask, in Part IV, whether socialism is *feasible*, by discussing difficulties that face the project of promoting socialism's principles not in the mere small, within the confined time and space of a camping trip, but throughout society as a whole, in a permanent way. Part V is a short coda.

I

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 separately). 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, for that matter, in many other non-massive contexts, that people cooperate within a common concern that, so far as is possible, everybody has a roughly similar opportunity to flourish, and also to

relax, on condition that she contributes, appropriately to her capacity, to the flourishing and relaxing of others. In these contexts most people, even most *antiegaltarians*, accept, indeed, take for granted, norms of equality and reciprocity. So deeply do most people take those norms for granted that no one on such trips questions them: to question them 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 that 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.

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. Too much time would be spent bargaining, and looking over one's shoulder for more lucrative possibilities.) 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 catches, and provides, 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* your good fortune?"

b. Following a three-hour time-off-for-personal-exploration period, an excited Sylvia returns to the campsite and announces: "I've stumbled upon a huge apple tree, full of perfect apples."

"Great," others exclaim, "now we can all have applesauce, 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.

c. The trippers are walking along a bridle path on which they discover a cache of nuts that some squirrel has abandoned.

Only Leslie, who has been endowed from birth with many knacks and talents, knows how to crack them, but she wants to charge for sharing that information. The campers see no important difference between her demand and Sylvia's.

d. Morgan recognizes the campsite.

"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-without-a-mattress-wise. There's a limit to the outdoorsiness to which some academics can be expected to submit: I'd rather have my socialism in the warmth of All Souls College than in the wet of the Catskills, 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 *best* way to run a camping trip, whether or not you actually *like* camping?

The circumstances of the camping trip are multiply special: many features distinguish it from the circumstances of life in a modern society. One may therefore not

infer, from the fact that camping trips of the sort that I have described are feasible and desirable, that society-wide socialism is equally feasible and equally desirable. There are too many major differences between the contexts for that inference to carry any conviction. What we urgently need to know is precisely *what* are the differences that matter, and how can socialists address them? Because of its contrasts with life in the large, the camping trip model serves well as a reference point for purported demonstrations that socialism across society is not feasible and/or desirable, since it seems eminently feasible and desirable on the trip.

II

THE PRINCIPLES REALIZED ON THE CAMPING TRIP

Two principles are realized on the camping trip, an egalitarian principle, and a principle of community. The community principle constrains the operation of the egalitarian principle by forbidding certain inequalities that the egalitarian principle permits. (The egalitarian principle in question is, as I shall explain, one of radical equality of opportunity: it is therefore consistent with certain inequalities of outcome.)

There are, in fact, a number of potentially competing egalitarian principles with which the camping trip, as I have

described it, complies, because the simple circumstances of the trip, unlike more complex ones, do not force a choice among them. But the only egalitarian principle realized on the trip that I shall bring into focus is the one that I regard as the correct egalitarian principle, the egalitarian principle that *justice* endorses, and that is a radical principle of equality of opportunity, which I shall call "socialist equality of opportunity."

Now, equality of opportunity, whether moderate or radical, removes obstacles to opportunity from which some people suffer and others don't, obstacles that are sometimes due to the enhanced opportunities that the more privileged people enjoy. Importantly, the removal of blocks to the opportunity of some people does

not always leave the opportunities of the initially better placed intact: sometimes it reduces the opportunities of those who benefit from inequality of opportunity. I underline this point because it means that promoting equality of opportunity is not only an *equalizing*, but also a *redistributing*, policy. Promoting equality of opportunity, in all of its forms, is not merely giving to some what others had and continue to enjoy.

We can distinguish three forms of equality of opportunity and three corresponding obstacles to opportunity: the first form removes one obstacle, the second form removes that one and a second, and the third form removes all three.

First, there is what might be called *bourgeois* equality of opportunity, by

which I mean the equality of opportunity that characterizes (at least in aspiration) the liberal age. Bourgeois equality of opportunity removes socially constructed status restrictions, both formal and informal, on life chances. An example of a formal status restriction is that under which a serf labors in a feudal society; an example of an informal status restriction is that from which a person whose skin is the wrong color may suffer in a society that is free of racist law but that nevertheless possesses a racist consciousness that generates racial disadvantage. This first form of equality of opportunity widens people's opportunities by removing constraints on opportunity caused by rights assignments and by bigoted and other prejudicial social perceptions.

Left-liberal equality of opportunity goes beyond bourgeois equality of opportunity. For it also sets itself against the constraining effect of social circumstances by which bourgeois equality of opportunity is undisturbed, the constraining effect, that is, of those circumstances of birth and upbringing that constrain not by assigning an inferior *status* to their victims, but by nevertheless causing them to labor and live under substantial disadvantages. The disadvantage targeted by left-liberal equality of opportunity derives immediately from a person's circumstances and does not depend for its constraining power on social perceptions or on assignments of superior and inferior rights. Policies promoting left-liberal equality of opportunity include head-start education

for children from deprived backgrounds. When left-liberal equality of opportunity is fully achieved, people's fates are determined by their native talent and their choices, and, therefore, not at all by their social backgrounds.

Left-liberal equality of opportunity corrects for *social* disadvantage, but not for native, or *inborn*, disadvantage. What I would call *socialist* equality of opportunity treats the inequality that arises out of native differences as a further source of injustice, beyond that imposed by unchosen social backgrounds, since native differences are equally unchosen. (Hence the similarity of the campers' attitudes to Sylvia's good luck and Leslie's, in scenarios b. and c. on pp. 8–9 above.) Socialist equality of opportunity seeks to correct

for *all* unchosen disadvantages, disadvantages, that is, for which the agent cannot herself reasonably be held responsible, whether they be disadvantages that reflect social misfortune or disadvantages that reflect natural misfortune. When socialist equality of opportunity prevails, differences of outcome reflect nothing but difference of taste and choice, not differences in natural and social capacities and powers.

So, for example, under socialist equality of opportunity income differences obtain when they reflect nothing but different individual preferences, including income/leisure preferences. People differ in their tastes, not only across consumer items, but also between working only a few hours and consuming rather little on the one hand, and working long hours

and consuming rather more on the other. Preferences across income and leisure are not in principle different from preferences across apples and oranges, and there can be no objection to differences in people's benefits and burdens that reflect nothing but different preferences, *when* (which is not always) *their satisfaction leads to a comparable aggregate enjoyment of life*. Such differences in benefits and burdens do not constitute *inequalities* of benefits and burdens.

Let me spell out the analogy at which I have just gestured. A table is before us, laden with apples and oranges. Each of us is entitled to take six pieces of fruit, with apples and oranges appearing in any combination to make up that six. Suppose, now, I complain that Sheila has five

apples whereas I have only three. Then it *should* extinguish my sense of grievance, a sense of grievance that is here totally inappropriate, when you point out that Sheila has only one orange whereas I have three, and that I could have had a bundle just like Sheila's had I forgone a couple of oranges. So, similarly, under a system where each gets the same income per hour, but can choose how many hours she works, it is not an intelligible complaint that some people have more take-home pay than others. The income/leisure trade-off is relevantly like the apples/oranges trade-off: that I have more income than you do no more shows, just as such, that we are unequally placed than my having four

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