

Comparing Socialism and Capitalism

1. How should we think about the comparison between socialism and capitalism? In this chapter I offer some tentative remarks about how to approach this question. I start by providing a working definition of capitalism and socialism (envisaged within dimension DII of a conception of social justice). I then discuss recent proposals by G. A. Cohen and Jason Brennan as to how to compare these social systems, and deploy some of the theoretical resources offered in this book to further frame and advance our normative inquiry on this important topic. I conclude by highlighting how the idea of dignity might play a role in the exercise.

Socialism is best defined in contrast with capitalism, as socialism has historically arisen both as a critical challenge to capitalism, and as a proposal for overcoming and replacing it. In the classical, Marxist definition, capitalism involves certain *relations of production*.¹ These comprise certain forms of control over the *productive forces*—the *labour power* that workers deploy in production and the *means of production* such as natural resources, tools, and spaces they employ to yield goods and services—and certain social patterns of economic interaction that typically correlate with that control. Capitalism displays the following constitutive features:

- (i) The bulk of the means of production is *privately owned and controlled*.
- (ii) People legally own their labour power. (Here capitalism differs from slavery and feudalism, under which systems some individuals are entitled to control, whether completely or partially, the labour power of others).
- (iii) *Markets* are the main mechanism allocating inputs and outputs of production and determining how societies' productive surplus is used, including whether and how it is consumed or invested.

¹ Cohen (2001: ch. 3); Fraser (2014). The definitional discussion in this section draws on Gilabert and O'Neill (2019: sect. 1).

An additional feature that is typically present wherever (i)–(iii) hold, is that:

- (iv) There is a *class division* between capitalists and workers, involving specific relations (e.g. of bargaining, conflict, or subordination) between those classes, and shaping the labour market, the firm, and the broader political process.

The existence of a labour market featuring wage labour is often seen by socialists as a necessary condition for a society to be counted as capitalist.² Typically, workers (unlike capitalists) must sell their labour power to make a living. They sell it to capitalists, who (unlike the workers) control the means of production. Capitalists typically subordinate workers in the production process, as capitalists have asymmetric decision-making power over what gets produced and how it gets produced. Capitalists also own the output of production and sell it in the market, and they control the predominant bulk of the flow of investment within the economy. The relation between capitalists and workers can involve cooperation, but also conflict (e.g. regarding wages and working conditions). As discussed in the previous chapter, this more or less antagonistic power relationship between capitalists and workers plays out in a number of areas, such as within production itself and in the broader political process, as in both economic and political domains decisions are made about who does what, and who gets what.

There are possible economic systems that would present exceptions, in which (iv) does not hold even if (i), (ii) and (iii) all obtain. Examples here are a society of independent commodity producers or a property-owning democracy (in which individuals or groups of workers own firms). There is debate, however, as to how feasible—accessible and stable—these are in a modern economic environment.³

Another feature that is also typically seen as arising where (i)–(iii) hold is this:

- (v) Production is primarily orientated to *capital accumulation* (i.e. economic production is primarily orientated to profit rather than to the satisfaction of human needs).⁴

In contrast to capitalism, socialism can be defined as a type of society in which, at a minimum, (i) is turned into (i*):

² See, e.g., Schweickart (2011: 23); Van Parijs (1991: 95); Wright (2010: 34).

³ O'Neill (2012).

⁴ Cohen (2001); Roemer (2017).

(i*) The bulk of the means of production is under social, democratic control.

Most socialists also tend to agree that (iv) is a key feature of realistic forms of capitalism and worry about it. They think that workers should have a real option to avoid the role of wage worker. On the other hand, changes with regard to features (ii), (iii), and (v) are hotly debated amongst socialists. Regarding (ii), socialists retain the view that workers should control their labour power, but many do not affirm the kind of absolute, libertarian property rights in labour power that would, for example, prevent taxation or other forms of mandatory contribution to cater for the basic needs of others.⁵ Regarding (iii), there is a burgeoning literature on ‘market socialism’, where proposals are advanced to create an economy that is socialist but nevertheless features extensive markets. Finally, regarding (v), although most socialists agree that, due to competitive pressures, capitalists are bound to seek profit maximization, some puzzle over whether, when they do this, it is ‘greed and fear’ and not the generation of resources to make others besides themselves better off that is the dominant, more basic drive and hence the degree to which profit-maximization should be seen as a normatively troubling phenomenon.⁶ Furthermore, some socialists argue that the search for profits in a market socialist economy is not inherently suspicious.⁷ Most socialists, however, tend to find the profit motive problematic.

An important point about this definition of socialism is that socialism is not equivalent to, and is arguably in conflict with, statism. On this interpretation, (i*) involves expansion of a kind of social power—the ‘power-with’ others implicated in the capacity to mobilize voluntary cooperation and collective action. This is in contrast with the two kinds of ‘power-over’ others implicated in state power—power based on the control of rule-making and rule-enforcing over a territory—and economic power—power based on the control of material resources.⁸ If a state controls the economy but is not in turn democratically controlled by the individuals engaged in economic life, what we have is some form of statism, not socialism.⁹ Alternatively, we could of course distinguish between democratic and non-democratic forms of socialism. The difference would be that the former construes social property as envisioned in (i*) and the latter understands it in centralized,

⁵ Cohen (1995).

⁶ See note 47 below on the case of capitalists amassing wealth to give it away through charity.

⁷ Schweickart (2011: 51).

⁸ Wright (2010).

⁹ See also Arnold (2016, 2022); Dardot and Laval (2014).

non-democratic terms (thus presenting an additional option (i**)). My focus here will be on democratic socialism.

The foregoing characterization, although somewhat nuanced, is still highly schematic and in need of further refinement. For example, democratic socialism itself can be construed in different ways. Democratic mechanisms of control of the means of production can be envisioned for the macro-level regarding the decisions made by the government, or they could be entertained for the more micro-level of the decisions made within firms (say in a form of workplace democracy), with several variants and combinations between both being possible. Furthermore (and as pointed out later in this chapter), hybrid combinations of elements of socialism and capitalism could be constructed and monitored by citizens through the general democratic process (provided it is indeed robust and sufficiently insulated from capture by elites). Thus, the institutional specifics of possible forms of democratic socialism turn out to be quite diverse.¹⁰

2. In his *Why Not Capitalism?* Jason Brennan provides a trenchant critique of socialism as defended by G. A. Cohen in *Why Not Socialism?*¹¹ In the latter book, Cohen argues that an ideal socialist society in which people honour radical principles of equality of opportunity and community is better than a capitalist society. Capitalism is morally flawed because in it some people have worse life prospects than others through no choice or fault of their own, and because economic practices are largely based on awful motivations of fear and greed rather than on more desirable ones such as mutual caring. Cohen distills his principles of equality and community by asking us to reflect on why we approve of the standard way of organizing social life in a camping trip. In a camping trip, there typically is collective control of most productive resources—such as pots and fish rods—and shared understandings about how to use them. 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.’¹² Most of us would want to scale up the socialist organization of the camping trip. If we could, we would be happy to organize society along camping trip lines. The trouble is that we do not really know how to do it. But since we also do not know for sure that it is impossible, we should try to imagine ways to achieve, or approximate, a socialist

¹⁰ See O’Neill (2022), which warns against a narrow, exclusive focus on structures of ownership of means of production (public or private).

¹¹ Brennan (2014); Cohen (2009). I discuss Cohen’s arguments in Gilabert (2011a) and (2012c). Cohen hesitates to see community as a principle of justice; in (2012c) I argue that justice includes aspects of it.

¹² Cohen (2009: 4–5). Notice the kinship between with the Abilities/Needs Principle.

societal organization. Such prospect, it seems, is a fitting target for dynamic intellectual and practical exploration.

In his response to Cohen, Brennan makes two main points. The first point is methodological. Brennan says that Cohen's argument is flawed because he fails to compare 'like with like'. Cohen argues in favour of socialism on the basis of a comparison of cases of ideal socialism with cases of real capitalism. What he should have done, instead, is compare ideal with ideal and real with real. If he engaged in these, more appropriate comparisons, things might have looked rather different. Brennan's second point is that, carefully assessed in these ways, capitalism turns out to be better than socialism. True, there has been exploitation and nasty handling of some people by others in real capitalism, but the murderous and economically inefficient record of real communist regimes in Russia, Cambodia, and China is far worse. Surprisingly, if we compare their ideal forms, capitalism is also better than socialism, as every form of association envisioned by the latter is permitted by the former, and then some. In Brennan's ideal capitalism, both private and collective property of resources can coexist. Thus, ideal capitalism actually lets 'a hundred flowers blossom'.¹³ To develop and defend his view of ideal capitalism, Brennan contrasts Cohen's exemplary scenario of the camping trip with his own. He asks us to consider a TV cartoon for children, the 'Mickey Mouse Clubhouse Village' show, in which various characters manage to thrive and live in social harmony while holding capitalist property rights. Brennan also identifies a set of principles that are implemented in his exemplary scenario. These are principles of voluntary community, mutual respect, reciprocity, social justice, and beneficence.¹⁴ In the cartoon, people 'live together happily, without envy, glad to trade value for value, glad to give and share, glad to help those in need, and never disposed to free ride, take advantage of, coerce, or subjugate one another'.¹⁵

3. Brennan's discussion is intelligent and illuminating. Two excellent points are the following. First, he rightly calls us to pay critical attention not only to the motivations of fear and greed (the ones Cohen focuses on), but also to lust for dominating power over others.¹⁶ Obsession with this kind of power has sadly been strong in various real (capitalist and socialist) regimes.¹⁷ And

¹³ Brennan (2014: 98).

¹⁴ These principles (Ibid., 29–36) call people to secure access to a decent life but do not require material equality—which would reflect socially destructive envy (33–4). There is no limit to acceptable inequality: some may be 'ten or ten thousand times richer' than others (34).

¹⁵ Ibid: 25.

¹⁶ Ibid: 44, 64.

¹⁷ Brennan also says that, when describing a social regime, we should focus on its formal institutions (such as its property rights profile), not on the motivations of agents living and acting under it (see Ibid: 62ff.). He says that Cohen conflates these two levels. But it is hermeneutically fairer to say that for Cohen

attention to it helps us illuminate problems about state power besides difficulties regarding the organization of economic institutions. Second, Brennan is correct that an appropriate comparative assessment of the merits of socialism and capitalism must compare like with like.¹⁸ We should compare ideal socialism with ideal capitalism, not with real capitalism, and we should compare real capitalism with real socialism, not with ideal socialism. That said, Brennan's arguments have serious flaws.

The main methodological difficulty is that there are in fact at least three, not two key comparisons that should be distinguished, and engaged, when contrasting socialism and capitalism. Brennan mentions comparisons between ideal socialism and ideal capitalism and between real socialism and real capitalism. But notice that the opposite of an ideal approach, a realistic one, can take into account two quite different categories: the 'actual' and the 'feasible'. Sometimes Brennan refers to examples of really existing, actual socialist and capitalist societies to refer to advantages or disadvantages of those regimes. These references focus on actual cases. But sometimes Brennan seems to refer to how capitalism could realistically be reformed and be made to be. He does this less with socialism, unfortunately. A symptomatic sentence is this: 'Ideal capitalism is better than ideal socialism, and realistic capitalism (of some sort) is better than realistic socialism.'¹⁹ I take it that when Brennan qualifies his reference to capitalism, he thinks that there are different kinds of realistic capitalism, some better than others, and that we should address the best of them. But the same should be done with socialism. In particular, we should consider cases of socialism that protect liberal civil liberties and affirm democratic political rights. It is true that Russian and Chinese communist regimes flouted these, but it is also true that from Marx to the present, very many figures and strands in the socialist movement affirmed them unequivocally. Cohen himself, as Brennan recognizes, did not recommend anti-democratic, centrally planned regimes, and embraced an 'anarchist' form of socialism.²⁰

To capture the relevant cases, I suggest that we need to entertain (at least) the following *three* comparisons:

the moral and political culture or social ethos that is dominant in a society is partly constitutive of it, and is a bona fide topic when assessing how just it is. It is otherwise hard to understand why Cohen criticizes (what he takes to be) Rawls's view that the primary focus of a theory of justice is only the basic institutional structure of a society. See Cohen (2008: ch. 3).

¹⁸ Brennan (2014: 58).

¹⁹ Ibid: 98–9.

²⁰ Ibid: 19. On Cohen's 'socialist/anarchist' outlook see, e.g., Cohen (2008: 1). Interestingly, Brennan also labels his view 'anarchist'—Ibid: 42, 75. There is indeed a point of convergence regarding anarchist ideas. Marxists often say (after Engels) that in the best society the state would 'wither away'.

- C1: between ideal socialism and ideal capitalism
 C2: between (various cases of) actual socialism and actual capitalism
 C3: between the best feasible socialism and the best feasible capitalism.²¹

Brennan concentrates on C1 and C2, neglecting C3. However, C3 is important theoretically, and certainly crucial for political practice.²²

As noted, I agree with Brennan that we should avoid the common mistake of thinking that the comparison between socialism and capitalism would be settled by showing that the best conceivable forms of socialism are better than all of the really existing forms of capitalism. To be fair to our opponent, we should compare like with like. But a key kind of comparison (which Brennan does not focus on) is the comparison between the best feasible incarnations of capitalism and socialism. This comparative exercise has the double merit of helping us be critical of the status quo when we should (as the best feasible form of socialism or capitalism may not already exist) while also keeping an eye on what we can actually bring about through lucid political action. I am not saying that the other comparisons are irrelevant or uninteresting. In fact, in the dynamic approach to justice and feasibility offered in Chapter 4, I have argued that evaluative comparisons regarding desirability independently of feasibility play a role in shaping projects for feasible transformations with a long-term horizon. But, all things considered, a central practical question must be ‘What is the best feasible option?’

Using the framework regarding the three dimensions of a conception of social justice, I suggest that a fully satisfactory critical appraisal of a social system, such as capitalism, by comparison to another, such as socialism, would involve the following tasks:

- Task 1: Identify the relevant and correct ideals and principles at DI and appraise, when possible, their structure (e.g. their relative weight).
 Task 2: Addressing DII, show that the critically targeted social system is significantly deficient with respect to the fulfilment of those ideals or principles.

²¹ Notice that unlike C1 and C3, C2 does not only refer to good cases of socialism and capitalism. When comparing the actual with the actual, we should look at all the cases. Furthermore, C3 could be made more precise by entertaining ‘maximally good feasible’ cases of each regime—thus allowing that there may be more than one case ranked at the top. (X is maximally good when it is no worse than any alternative, while x is best when it is superior to every alternative.)

²² Brennan seems aware that there are different modalities that might be relevant when characterizing social regimes (besides the categories of the real and the ideal). In particular, he hints at the distinction between what is ‘attainable’ (or simply possible) and ‘realistic’ (feasible) (see *Ibid*: 71). The former seems relevant for C1, while the latter is relevant for C3. The specificity of C3 is not worked out, however. Cohen himself neglects C3 in his (2009), although elsewhere he offers relevant remarks on how various forms of socialism and capitalism might distribute freedom (Cohen 2011: 163–5).

Task 3: Still at DII, show that some workable alternative to this system would do better at fulfilling these ideals or principles.

Task 4: Addressing DIII, show that the alternative system would be accessible at reasonable cost.

This schedule of tasks is especially fitting for comparative exercise C3.

4. Turning to specific matters about each of comparison, I will highlight four sets of problems with Brennan's discussion. This critical assessment will help identify points that are fruitful for framing the positive exploration of the comparison between socialism and capitalism.

(i) The first problem concerns the appeal to exemplary scenarios. Cohen's camping trip is strikingly different from Brennan's cartoon. The camping trip is not really stipulative²³ at all, but an actual example which I think most of us have little difficulty in grasping (and which many of us have actually experienced), while the Disney scenario is a wholly fictional concoction which doesn't even involve human beings. People in the camping trip are like us. They have the same psychology and physiognomy. It is thus not surprising that Cohen's exemplary scenario is much more consequential to the reader as a source of intuition pumps. The difference between C1, on the one hand, and C2 and C3, on the other, is not that they assume a different kind of human nature, or deep differences in motivational profiles. The key difference, for Cohen, is in how different social designs diverge in triggering, or fostering, the various components of the same set of psychological tendencies (which includes a mixture of self-centred and other-regarding mechanisms).²⁴

(ii) A second problem concerns the principles used in the comparisons between socialism and capitalism. While Brennan uses five principles, Cohen uses two. These normative platforms overlap. For example, they both include requirements of community and of basic, sufficientarian, material support. But they also diverge. For example, Cohen affirms, and Brennan denies, the desirability of equality of opportunity. Furthermore, although it is intuitively obvious that socialism involves principles of community and equality, it is not at all apparent that capitalism is inherently linked to a principle of beneficence. Brennan's labeling of some of his principles as 'capitalist principles' is surprising and seems oddly stipulative. In any case, the comparisons should

²³ Pace Brennan (2014: 65).

²⁴ I add that when we explore differences between ideal, actual, and best feasible cases, we should not only consider possible changes regarding cultural and institutional schemes, but also regarding material resources (levels of material scarcity). This point is neglected by Brennan, but has significant implications that will become salient when I discuss his argument for the alleged superiority of ideal capitalism over ideal socialism.

be made under the same principles.²⁵ Alternatively, there should be a separate exercise comparing the principles themselves.²⁶ Task 1 and 2 can be run simultaneously, but the first can, to some extent, be run separately.

Let me say more on the last point. A very powerful way to argue for a political view is to show to your audience that it is better than the relevant alternatives on account of values or principles your audience already holds dear. But this strategy of argument is not always sufficient. The reason is that socialists and capitalists may disagree at the level of value or principle. This may happen in at least two ways. First, even if they agree about what are the ideals or principles to assess societal structures, they may disagree about their relative importance in a way that yields different conclusions as to what structure we have reason to favour all things considered. So, for example, capitalists and socialists might agree that socialism does better than capitalism regarding democracy and that capitalism does better than socialism regarding some negative liberties, but disagree about the relative weight of these values. Capitalists might prefer a non-democratic regime that protects certain negative economic liberties to a democratic regime that constrains them. A second possibility is that socialists or capitalists accept certain ideals or principles which their opponents do not embrace. An example is the view that certain positive duties of solidarity or community may be enforceable. Socialists are generally amenable to this idea, while capitalists of a libertarian bent are hostile to it. When this is so, the discussion has to move to more fundamental levels in moral reflection.²⁷ Relatedly, socialists and capitalists may agree on some ideals but specify them differently at the level of prescriptive principles. Thus, many socialists and capitalists embrace an ideal of self-determination, but when certain socialists also have strong commitments to solidarity or community which certain capitalists lack, the former reject and the latter affirm a prescriptive principle of self-ownership that bans any

²⁵ For a sharp discussion of this methodological point, see Claveau (2014).

²⁶ If this is done, however, a more careful articulation of each set is needed. Regarding socialism, for example, an explicit statement of principles of personal freedom and of democratic politics should be added. They are not fully articulated in Cohen's discussion, although they are hinted at various points in his text (see, e.g., the reference to a personal prerogative in Cohen 2009: 47–7, 76).

²⁷ As articulated in Chapter 3, the Abilities/Needs Principle encodes strong positive duties. Other examples of socialist views with potentially controversial values are these. Albert's (2016) 'participatory planning' economy relies on a strong commitment to 'solidarity'. Schweickart's (2016) 'economic democracy' model draws on a commitment to (collective) 'participatory autonomy'. When defending workers' cooperatives and other forms of non-capitalist economic activity, Wright (2015b) invokes 'emancipatory ideals' such as 'equality, democracy, and solidarity'. Solidarity could underwrite support for the needs of others even when (due to their different capacities) they are less productive, and participatory autonomy could license collective decisions at workplaces that are at odds with some individuals' interests in certain forms of negative liberty. Socialists typically have expansive views of the scope and range of democracy (extending it across national borders and reaching into the details of an economic system). And their views of equality are typically also quite strong (including effective besides formal opportunity, and incorporating some demands of equality of condition—e.g. regarding health care).

imposition of non-voluntary assistance to others (such as taxation to fund health care).²⁸

A puzzling issue when we compare socialism and capitalism within Task 1 is that although it is quite clear that socialists often see themselves as holding a ‘socialist’ view regarding DI besides DII, it is not clear that their opponents hold themselves to be ‘capitalists’ about DI besides being ‘capitalists’ about DII. Typically, people endorsing capitalism at DII characterize their views at DI by using other terms, like ‘libertarian’ or ‘liberal’. (Of course, some people holding socialist views at DI may concede to capitalism at DII, although typically with some strong qualifications.) Is this a mere terminological point or is there something deeper going here? One possibility is that socialists embraced much of the modern liberal credo regarding DI (such as the affirmation of civil and political liberties, formal equality of opportunity, and moral universalism) and focused on adding novel ideas regarding solidarity, effective self-determination, and self-realization at work. Because of this, they might be more ready than liberal defenders of capitalism to insist in articulating DI in a distinctive way.

(iii) When arguing that capitalism is better than socialism, Brennan often refers to the virtues of markets. But this neglects the varieties of socialism that also feature markets. Brennan acknowledges in passing the possibility of a market socialist view,²⁹ but then proceeds as if markets were a distinctive feature of a capitalist society.³⁰ This is unsatisfactory, as there are important proposals for socialist design (relevant for comparison C3, and perhaps also for C1) that couple socialized control of the means of production with markets for the allocation of labour or for goods and services (as well as with traditional liberal civil rights and democratic freedoms). In Schweickart’s (2011) ‘economic democracy’ model, a democratically steered state leases out firms to worker-run cooperatives, while incentivizing through public banks certain forms of economic activity. In Roemer’s (1994) coupon socialism, every citizen is initially provided with equal coupons they can use to get shares in firms. They cannot cash them to get money for consumption purposes, but they can get dividends from investing them. When they die, their coupons revert to the common pool for distribution to new generations. In Carens’s (2003) proposal, markets are used to signal optimal intersections between the demand and supply of labour and consumption goods, but incomes are taxed to equality.³¹

²⁸ Recall discussion of the Sleepwalking Anna case in Chapter 1, Section 2.2.2. See also Gilibert (2012c).

²⁹ Brennan (2014: 16).

³⁰ E.g. *Ibid.*: 15, 66, 87.

³¹ I presented an amended version of Carens’s proposal in Chapter 3. See further the survey in Gilibert and O’Neill (2019: sect. 4.2). It is also worth considering less radical views of socialism, such as the one

Because of the oversight of market socialism, Brennan's approach is not well-equipped to tackle Task 3 in the comparative assessment of socialism and capitalism. Perhaps Brennan's neglect of market socialism is a result of the dialectical context of his debate with Cohen. At times Cohen proceeds as if there is a necessary conflict between socialism and markets, and a tight relation between the latter and contra-egalitarian or contra-communitarian principles and motives. (This is not always obvious, however, given that Cohen accepts that some version of Carens's proposal, which does include market devices, could implement socialist principles fully.³²) Another source of worry with markets in the Marxist tradition is that they seem to be in tension with the ideal of self-determination, and in this way generate alienation. The complexity of a market economy is such that many outcomes emerging from the aggregate of market transactions are not rationally controlled by the agents entangled in them. A centrally planned economy would not, however, solve this problem, as workers would not control it either, and in it they would likely enjoy even less self-determination overall (while suffering other problems regarding efficiency). A strong hypothesis for further exploration in Task 3 is then that market mechanisms could be introduced without certain costs in alienation, and that when some such costs arise, they must all things considered be accepted because the alternatives are even worse (in terms of alienation and other problems).³³

(iv) Fourth, and relatedly, Brennan's arguments for his claim that ideal capitalism is superior to ideal socialism are not convincing. He characterizes capitalism as including (a) private property in means of production, (b) use of markets, and (c) extensive economic liberties for individuals.³⁴ Since in his comparisons he ignores market socialist proposals, he fails to show that ideal capitalism is better with respect to (b). The virtues of markets he lists (such

recently presented by Piketty (2019: ch. 17). Piketty's 'participatory socialism' does not eliminate private property in the means of production entirely. Instead, it recommends significant reforms such that property becomes, in significant ways, 'social' and 'temporary'. Large firms feature schemes of codetermination giving workers a say on how production proceeds. Capital is dispersed through progressive taxation on property, inheritance, and income, which is used to fund a capital grant for young people, a secure basic income for all, and the public services of a social state (such as education and health care). Changes to the democratic process to make citizens' influence in it more equal, and international arrangements to restrict capital flight, are also envisioned.

³² Cohen (2009: 62–5).

³³ As pointed out to me by Andrew Williams, the fact that many leftists have come to terms with the need for markets may be a reason (to be added to the four explored in Section 4 of Chapter 5) for the decrease in their interest in the discourse of alienation. There are other possibilities, however. For example, Albert's (2003) proposal of 'Parecon' (participatory economy) envisions a scheme of nested deliberative forums of producers and consumers which would work together to consolidate schedules of economic activity that combine planning and democratic decision-making. But there are serious worries about its feasibility. See Wright (2010: 260–5).

³⁴ Brennan (2014: 75).

as their fostering prosperity, self-authorship, mutual trust, and a tendency of economic agents to put themselves in the shoes of others) can also be displayed by market socialism.

So the most relevant arguments should be those concerning (a) and (c). The arguments regarding (a) are likely to be especially significant, however, because (c) is often also affirmed by socialists in some forms. For example, what exercises many socialists the most is not the permission of entering wage labour contracts, but the lack of real opportunities to make a living without having to do so. Wage labour, they think, is a feature of actual and feasible capitalist societies which is pervasive and extremely hard to avoid. So, in the controversy between socialism and capitalism, the most important question seems to be: Should we acknowledge private property in the means of production and contractual relations between capitalists who own means of production and wage workers who do not (i.e. features (i) and (iv) of capitalism as characterized in section 1) as structuring features of the economy which are pervasive and extremely hard to avoid? Socialists, and some liberal egalitarians, tend to answer negatively, saying that rights regarding (i) and (iv) should be either rejected or seen as non-basic and open to very severe qualifications.

Brennan acknowledges that in ideal scenarios people do not *need* capitalist property rights, that ideal socialist citizens would respect and tolerate others' pursuit of their economic projects, allowing them to use economic resources to advance them. But he says that people would be better off if they did have these rights.³⁵ I could not understand why. Brennan invokes the importance of being able to pursue our own projects without constantly asking for others' permission whenever we use the resources we need, and of 'feeling at home' in our economic activities.³⁶ But ideal socialism could give individual agents opportunities to achieve these goods. In a market socialist society, individuals or groups can gain significant control of means of production, which they can use in their own way without having to constantly ask for others' permission. Of course, there would be constraints (such as limits on selling or inheriting these resources). But Brennan's own view of property rights takes these rights to be only *prima facie* (or *pro tanto*) claims that have to be weighed against other normative considerations.³⁷ Socialists can also weigh social ownership against various concerns regarding the self-determination

³⁵ Ibid: 79. In ideal socialism people would tolerate individuals with capitalist preferences. But if it is still desirable (although not necessary) to establish conventional rights to the tolerated behaviour, then the socialist could make a similar move and ask for more than the kindness and charity of the wealthy in ideal capitalist societies to secure people's access to conditions of fair equality of opportunity.

³⁶ Ibid: 78–83.

³⁷ Ibid: 77.

of individuals and groups. Brennan presents his ideal capitalist society as a hybrid system including both private property in some means of production and collective property in others. Socialists can of course also do that (and in fact they do so).³⁸

We should also consider whether there would be material scarcity in the ideal scenarios envisaged. If there were not, then both socialism and capitalism would allow completely unrestricted access to and control of any resource whatsoever. If there were scarcity, then both regimes would impose limits when there are competing desires regarding the control or use of resources. Either agents would have to share and ask for permission from others to access the resources, or some would face a greater risk of being completely deprived of them. (Socialists are more likely to choose the former, and capitalists the latter.) Various instances and combinations of these arrangements are possible in both regimes, through hybrid frameworks that for example allow some producers relative independence in the use of certain resources for some purposes and for some time, or give them private property but tax economic activity to subsidize access to important resources on the part of others. In both cases, the arrangements could be implemented through coercive institutional frameworks or via informal voluntary schemes.

So, *pace* Brennan, ideal socialism can allow a hundred flowers to blossom. If it imposes restrictions (given material scarcity), they would overall be fairly circumscribed, and not unlike the ones Brennan's ideal capitalism would (or should³⁹) itself have to impose. There is conceptual and moral space, in both cases, for coercive or noncoercive ways of implementing the relevant norms, and for hybrid institutional structures.

Properly understood, the socialist ideal includes requirements of personal and political freedom besides community and equality. A desirable form of socialism would recognize negative and positive duties to respect and enable each individual to pursue their flourishing. What is the difference with ideal capitalism then? A key difference is that socialists have an explicit commitment to equal chances.⁴⁰ Brennan does not take ideal capitalism to require equality of opportunity. No help to the worse off is required beyond support

³⁸ On hybrid social systems, see Wright (2010) and O'Neill (2020: sect. 2).

³⁹ I add 'should' because a key issue here is whether we should secure robust equality of opportunity.

⁴⁰ Even if neither an ideal socialist nor an ideal capitalist regime had a state coercively enforcing its norms, a socialist would say that there is more justice when people use their liberty to pursue schemes of cooperation that foster equally the capabilities to flourish of all. Practices of liberty that, avoidably, do not aim at achieving this are morally deficient even if they should not be coercively restricted. Another difference concerns democracy, which is not affirmed by Brennan but is embraced by many socialists. In democratic socialism people choose through their democratic institutions the composition of their hybrid system. So democratic socialists would likely criticize, but would certainly accept as legitimate, democratically selected hybrids that give private property more sway than they think fair.

for basic needs and the conditions for a decent life. The more demanding idea of material equality is summarily dismissed as reflecting the socially destructive sentiment of envy. This is a typical right-wing complaint against egalitarianism.⁴¹ And it is not convincing. We can defend robust equality of opportunity as a matter of the socially constructive concern for fairness, and design economic systems so that they provide everyone ample and equal effective chances to pursue their life projects. Only a fetishistic obsession with property in material stuff would motivate complaints against a redistributive regime that grants each person plenty of room for developing and exercising their capacities but also gives them roughly equal prospects for effectively doing so.⁴² Brennan's capitalism seems to find no difficulty with massive inequalities in access to material resources (including means of production) that result from inheritance, a paradigmatic case of unfair inequality of opportunity.⁴³ So of the hundred flowers blossoming in capitalism, some will likely shine a lot less brightly than others, unfairly and avoidably, through no choice or fault of their own.

The differences between the ideal capitalism of Brennan and the ideal socialism of liberal and democratic socialists are smaller than expected. Both accept hybrid institutional regimes that accommodate much of what the other calls for. The differences are likely to be much more significant when we turn to the comparison of feasible (but perhaps not ideally perfect) cases, i.e. C3. And this, arguably, is the politically most important comparison when it comes to choosing between socialism and capitalism as competing accounts of how ultimate control of means of production in a society should be allocated.⁴⁴ The denizens of Brennan's Disney cartoon might be too good-hearted to use their superior bargaining power to exploit and dominate the less wealthy or strong. But the rich and strong engage extensively in this kind of treatment in every actual capitalist society.⁴⁵ Importantly, they do it all the more the less their capitalist property rights are constrained by regulations geared to the protection of everyone's civil, political, and socioeconomic rights.⁴⁶ One really has to wonder how feasible it would be to have a capitalist

⁴¹ For responses, see Rawls (1999: sect. 81) and Scanlon (2018: 2–8).

⁴² Brennan (2014: 79) says that the denizens of his capitalist utopia are not fetishistic regarding their control of material resources. But the claims that capitalist property rights are necessary for 'feeling at home' in the world, and that redistribution to foster equality of opportunity would be an unacceptable violation of liberty seem to me to reflect exactly that fetishism.

⁴³ See Hall (2018).

⁴⁴ I say 'ultimate control' to allow for the possibility (common in proposals of market socialism) that democratic decisions are made to give sub-groups of society relative (potentially quite significant) control of means of production for certain periods of time and under certain conditions.

⁴⁵ Brennan seems to acknowledge this (Brennan 2014: 86, 94, 106n.18).

⁴⁶ It has been argued that deregulation in capitalist societies increases economic inequality (Piketty 2014), that economic inequality translates into political inequality (Gilens and Benjamin 2014), and that there is a deep tension between capitalism and democracy (Bowles and Gintis 1986; Wright 2010: 81–4).

society that allows for extensive private property in means of production, and thus for the formation of classes and the division of economic agents into capital owners and wage workers, without also introducing exploitation and domination.⁴⁷ In actual and feasible capitalist societies, wage workers have much less real freedom than their employers to author their lives on their own terms, and they must indeed constantly ask for permission to engage in economic activities. Lacking control of means of production, they must (on pain of severe material hardship) sell their labour power to some capitalist who owns them. Then they must follow the orders of their employers' managers at every turn, every working day, as they toil under them. Besides exploitation and domination, they experience extensive alienation. They often do not feel at home in an economic environment they have little power to shape, and in which their talents are not unfolded. It is not clear that a hundred flowers do indeed blossom in the feasible world of capitalism. That picture seems like false advertising. Self-determination and self-realization turn out to be a dream which in the end only some can achieve, or that some achieve much more profoundly than others (and this partly as a result of their taking unfair advantage of the weaker bargaining power of the underachievers). It is surely worth exploring whether there are feasible forms of socialism that do better than the actual and feasibly best forms of capitalism when it comes to securing for all equal real chances to lead flourishing lives. We should try to do better than capitalism. Maybe we can. Due appreciation of our dignity calls for this exploration.

5. The main upshot of the foregoing discussion is that the project of envisioning socialist alternatives to capitalism is very much alive, both for ideal and best-feasible comparisons. Now, an important framing point to

Some defenders of capitalism might respond that they envision a form of capitalism featuring small property-owning producers who face each other in market relations that do not extensively include wage labour. But it is unlikely that a modern capitalist economy can proceed for long without generating wide inequalities and wage labour arrangements between highly unequal bargainers. See Cohen (2001: ch.7, sect. 2). Arnold (2013: 393–8) offers an effective response to the speculations that a minimally regulated market economy would maximize the income and wealth of the worst-off, or make it feasible for workers to develop their own, democratically run cooperative workplaces if they chose to avoid capitalist firms. Arnold (2020) in turn challenges Brennan's depiction of the ideal capitalist society. Overall, the odds are that an initial setup of small property holdings will unravel in the direction of concentrations of ownership and power. I add that inequalities of bargaining power will exist in the initial setup itself due to differences in natural endowments (talents, physical abilities, etc.). With more socialized forms of control of means of production, these tendencies could be more effectively confronted from the start.

⁴⁷ Fear and greed are systematically mobilized in current capitalism. And perhaps the best feasible versions of it would include more of them than the best feasible versions of socialism. In polemic with Cohen, Steiner (2014) notes that it is a mistake to assume that there cannot be market transactions without fear and greed. But I think that Cohen's considered view is that *capitalist* markets (unlike socialist ones of the Carens's type, for example) *typically* involve those motives. Of course, the rich (like Andrew Carnegie in Steiner's example) could use their wealth for charitable purposes. But even then, it would be better if people did not have to depend on their discretionary will (however beneficent) to get certain benefits. In a more egalitarian society, they could access them more robustly as a matter of right.

keep in mind as we engage in comparative assessments is that a plausible, democratic socialism should be seen as a successor of capitalism that absorbs its progressive elements while taking the emancipatory agenda forward. Socialism is not a return to a collectivist past. It is an attempt to support individual freedom in a way that recognizes the significance of solidarity. This attempt might, to some extent and in some respects, involve restrictions of liberty, but it will also involve for the most part its deepening and expansion, and its equal accessibility to all.

This agenda could be advanced by deploying the idea of human dignity. We could, for example, develop an account of socialism as a dignitarian outlook, and consider how it would diverge from capitalism by developing a different view of the principles emerging at DI and of the institutions and practices at DII. Potentially different pictures regarding DIII could arise as well.

So, regarding DI, we might think that both socialists and capitalists embrace the dignity of each individual. But socialists might articulate the idea in distinctive ways, for example by linking it to (a) self-determined self-realization at work, (b) the affirmation of stronger (even enforceable) positive duties, (c) stronger equality of opportunity (for example fostering more equal initial capabilities and regular alterations of unequal outcomes to preserve some of the more egalitarian setup over time), and (d) a stronger commitment to democratic decision-making (and this in various arenas of social life, to include economic besides state or governmental affairs). As presented in this book, the development of the Dignitarian Approach through the ideal of Solidaristic Empowerment and the Abilities/Needs Principle would capture these points. With them in mind, socialists can also articulate a distinctive rendering of the traditional ideas of freedom, equality, community, and democracy.

These differences might have an impact on how we envision societal frameworks at DII. Thus, capitalist relations of production and the insufficiently solidaristic ethos tied to them might be shown to do worse than socialist relations of production and a more solidaristic ethos regarding (a)–(d). Even where hybrid forms of socialist and capitalist organization at DII are entertained, the divergence at DI could motivate different dynamic paths when these combinations are selected for the short and the long term.

Regarding DIII, there would be obvious differences in that the evaluation of the status quo and the goals of transition would be different. There might also be differences about the structure of normative judgement within DIII as a result of the emphasis on solidarity at DI. Socialists would ask currently privileged individuals to sacrifice their personal economic interests more than capitalists would. It is important to insist, however, that democratic

socialists do not dismiss people's civil and political rights as some caricatures of socialism allege.⁴⁸

Besides the question of what are the appropriate standards of comparison between socialism and capitalism, there is the question of who is to do the comparing. Who gets to say what social regime is better? I think that in metaphysical terms the right answer is that no one does. A social formation is better than another not because anyone says so, but because it *is* so. People should embrace a view of justice because it is correct, not the other way around. On the other hand (but compatibly), on epistemic and directly normative terms it makes sense to say that everyone should be able to join the discussion. Everyone makes mistakes and could help and be helped by others to correct them. And people's self-determination is a central value. This is why a primary task of social change should always be to increase the power of those affected by social injustice to formulate alternatives to it. A result is an additional, albeit partial test of justice for a social system: How much power does it allow people to assess whether it is the right one for them to live under? A system that suppresses political speech and blocks political action, generates deeply unequal distribution of information and education, and deprives people of the time they need to enlighten themselves and participate in politics is, in this respect, worse than another that generates fewer of these deficits in political autonomy. Correspondingly, an important way to defend an outlook on social justice is to show that its implementation affords people greater chances to figure out whether it or another outlook they might entertain is best. A properly democratic socialism would strongly affirm this second-order political autonomy. Such an affirmation would certainly flow naturally from the dignitarian perspective, due to its emphasis on self-determination.

6. In this book I have explored some elements of an articulation and defence of socialism at DII and DIII on the basis of a substantive normative conception of human dignity at DI. It could be objected that this enterprise is unnecessarily controversial. Why work out a new justification of socialism along these lines instead of proceeding on the basis of a set of ideas

⁴⁸ It is true that some actual experiments in socialist politics have unjustifiably flouted these rights. On democratic views of socialist transition, see Gilibert and O'Neill (2019: sect.5). The historical record of capitalism features important deprivations as well, for example in the early stages of transformation away from feudalism or authoritarian communism, in the processes of primitive accumulation involving imperialism and slavery, in cross-border interventions and wars, and in the repression of socialist and other forms of activism. For discussion on whether these issues are ongoing, see Fraser and Jaeggi (2018).

already currently shared (such as some notion of freedom or democracy)? In response, I want to make four points.

The first is that it may not really be the case that there is a set of substantive grounds that is already shared which is sufficient to justify socialism. The set might be too thin to provide enough resources to defend socialism and further, controversial grounds might have to be added. Even if the set is sufficient, it might be that it would only prove to be so once it is interpreted in a specific way that turns out to be controversial. On the other hand, the idea of human dignity might not itself be so controversial. It is, after all, at the core of human rights practice, which advances one of the most broadly shared political projects of our time. True, we would be developing a certain interpretation of this idea, which will likely be controversial, but this would not land the approach into a worse situation than the one faced by the alternatives strategy discussed here (given the likely disagreements on the allegedly shared ideas it relies on).

Second, at least in some of its interventions, philosophy is primarily aimed at finding the truth rather than at winning disputes. The Dignitarian Approach I develop in this book strikes me as true. It is up to the reader to do what they may with it—although I do hope they will share it.

Third, there could be multiple grounds at DI for the same propositions at DII and DIII. Even if you do not accept the Dignitarian Approach, you could defend socialism on other grounds you find more appealing. It might even be a good thing that we articulate a multiplicity of justificatory sources of the social outlook we hold dear, as this may make its pursuit—the accessibility and the stability of its realization—more robust in a context of diversity in people's moral commitments.

Finally, engaging the dignitarian perspective does actually have practical significance, especially if we focus on the long term. I think that social and political philosophers with socialist leanings should confront the failure of some forms of liberalism and libertarianism to give solidarity its due. I have articulated the Dignitarian Approach so that positive duties and rights are explicitly embraced (although, of course, several negative ones are also recognized). Solidarity is at the heart of socialism, and socialists should aim to shape moral and political culture so that it is acknowledged as the crucial value that it is. Philosophers have a role to play in articulating this value in an upfront and uncluttered way. Narrowly focusing on quick dialectical victories would detract from this important task.