

Socialism and Freedom*

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In the minds of many, socialism is the enemy of freedom. This is unsurprising, for a variety of reasons. First, and most importantly, the human rights abuses perpetrated by so-called socialist states like the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China have understandably led to the formation of negative associations with the word "socialism". Second, and also importantly, capitalist ideology compels us to think of capitalism as the natural way for human economic affairs to be organized. If we unreflectively accept this, it can seem that any other system, such as socialism, would constitute a restriction of our natural freedom.

As time passes, though, more and more people are eagerly starting to look again for alternatives to capitalism. This is also unsurprising, for a number of good reasons. To start, many now believe that capitalism, contrary to common rhetoric that it is the only workable economic system, simply does not work: as we continue to consume global resources, driving ourselves over an environmental cliff, the need for an alternative system of global production makes itself ever increasingly apparent. Further, economic inequalities on an incomprehensible scale continue to widen while extreme global poverty persists, fueling growing skepticism that economic justice is possible under capitalism.

With this greater interest in alternatives to capitalism and greater distance from the "socialism" of the past, new ideas and new possibilities of what socialism could be are gaining traction. As we think again about the real possibility of socialism, it is past time to reconsider the relationship between socialism and the right to freedom. Can socialism be compatible with the right to freedom?

Here, I argue that when we have a better understanding of what it is to have the right to freedom and a better idea of what socialism can be, we will

*This is a preprint of an article forthcoming in *Philosophical Topics* vol. 48, no. 2, Fall 2020 (Delayed due to Covid-19).

see that socialism is indeed consistent with freedom. In section 1, I argue that the right to freedom is best understood as a right to direct our own wills in the world, consistently with the rights of others to do the same. In section 2, I articulate various conceptions of what socialism is and could be, focusing in particular on the forms of socialism that contemporary socialists argue for, which are far from historically prominent centrally planned state socialist regimes. Finally, in section 3, I argue that the right to freedom is compatible with a robustly democratic form of socialism.

1 Freedom

The rhetoric of freedom is ubiquitous in contemporary political discourse. In academic contexts and in ordinary life, criticism of political institutions is so often grounded in concerns about how these institutions will affect our freedom. Though a great many people would agree that freedom is essentially important when it comes to our political rights, it can be difficult to specify what exactly this form of freedom is. Making this specification is especially difficult because there are so many different things we can mean when we say the word freedom. The aim of this section is to clarify the nature of the sort of freedom to which we take ourselves to have an essentially important political right.

What, then, is it to have a right to freedom?

Historically, actually existing socialist regimes have been associated with a specific positive form of freedom understood as rational self-mastery.¹ While we might think there is a sense in which we are free when we achieve rational self-mastery, we cannot have a right to freedom of this sort. If we

¹There are other forms of so-called positive freedom popular in contemporary discourse that are distinct in important ways from this historical conception of positive freedom. In particular, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum have developed an idea of freedom as “the freedom to achieve well-being” (Sen 1985, 201). According to Sen, this form of freedom consists in substantive freedoms that “foster human capabilities” (2000, 10). This form of freedom is much more open-ended than the form of positive freedom as self-mastery, and so avoids many of the paternalism worries associated with that form of freedom. A direct right to having one’s capabilities fostered is still questionable, particularly in cases where states do not have the resources to foster individuals’ capabilities in these ways. Still, there is room within a Kantian theory of right for some rights of this sort, as developing some capacities, like the capacities required for participation in a democratic process, is necessary for equal democratic self-government.

have a right to this form of positive freedom, our government would be obligated to make us behave rationally and morally. Authoritarian “socialist” regimes of the twentieth century purported to make us free in this sense, in that they claimed to create conditions for us to become masters of ourselves and live our lives as human beings ideally should.² As the authoritarian regimes of the previous century have made clear, though, compelling people to live their lives well is coercive and paternalistic, and it is flatly opposed to another sense of freedom that many of us think is very important. What, then, is this other important type of freedom, the type of freedom we have a right to?

To begin answering this question, we can look to the basic intuitive idea we have in mind when we speak of such a right. The right to freedom is commonly invoked when a person’s autonomy is threatened: we often take this right to freedom to be violated when governments or other people control what we do and how we live our lives, limiting the choices we can make in ways that appear unacceptable. While this intuitive idea is compelling to many, much more needs to be said to fully articulate what it would be to have a right to freedom of this sort. Here, I explore attempts to articulate this right to freedom. Further, this section lays the groundwork for the arguments that follow, as when we better understand what this right to freedom is, we can better understand what it takes for an economic system to be compatible with it.

The most influential political conception of freedom is the idea of freedom as negative liberty. I will begin by explicating this conception of freedom as negative liberty, where any restriction of my activity constitutes a restriction of my freedom. I will argue that this conception is fundamentally flawed and cannot capture what it would be to have the sort of robust right to freedom that so many of us find intuitively compelling. I will then argue that a similar but essentially different Kantian conception of the right to freedom does provide a coherent, self-sufficient, and robust right of this sort.

1.1 Negative Liberty

The conception of freedom as negative liberty is ubiquitous in contemporary political philosophy. From classical liberals to libertarians, this conception

²See, e.g., Isaiah Berlin’s characterization of positive liberty and its connections to socialism (2002). Of course, these regimes did not actually secure positive freedom of this sort.

of freedom has heavily influenced the theories of so many political philosophers who care deeply about freedom.³ With this conception, freedom is understood as noninterference. As Isaiah Berlin famously puts it, with a conception of freedom as negative liberty, “I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree.”⁴ Thus, with a conception of freedom as negative liberty, any restriction of my activity is a restriction of my freedom.

On this picture, since every restriction of one’s activity restricts one’s freedom, securing one person’s freedom to perform a particular action requires restricting others’ freedom to interfere with that action. Imagine, for example, that we value and want to protect a person’s freedom to walk on the sidewalk free from interference from others. To secure this particular freedom, we must prohibit people from doing things that would interfere with it, like driving their cars and tractors on the sidewalk, running wildly down it, and walking their ferocious beasts down it. With this conception of freedom as negative liberty, “the liberty of some must depend on the restraint of others.”⁵

Since freedoms necessarily come into conflict with a conception of freedom as negative liberty, scholars who employ this conception typically do not argue that we should have a right to unrestricted freedom of this sort.⁶ Instead, with a conception of freedom as negative liberty, the role of government is to put appropriate limits on freedom, which involves trading off some freedoms for the sake of protecting other freedoms that we prioritize more highly.

Furthermore, since every restriction of my activity is a restriction of my freedom with this conception, any government restriction of my activity constitutes a restriction of my freedom. In this way, the conception of freedom

³See, e.g., Mill 2006. Furthermore, as prominent contemporary scholar of libertarianism, Brennan (2012, 27) points out, over most of the history of libertarianism, “most libertarians tended to argue that the only real kind of liberty is negative liberty.”

⁴Berlin 2002, 169.

⁵Berlin 2002, 171.

⁶As Berlin (2002, 170) puts it, having an unqualified right to negative liberty “would entail a state in which all men could boundlessly interfere with all other men,” which would lead to “social chaos.”

as negative liberty heavily shapes classical liberal and libertarian views that rely on it: with these views, there is a general presumption that government activity should be kept to a minimum. For example, in surveying libertarian views, Jason Brennan explains that according to “liberals,” “all restrictions on liberty are presumed wrong and unjust until shown otherwise,” and so “[i]t follows that political authority and all laws are assumed unjustified until shown otherwise.”⁷ This view that government activity should be kept to a minimum is a central tenet of libertarianism.⁸ This restriction of government activity carries over into a general presumption against government regulation of the economy.

Any view that relies on a conception of freedom as negative liberty must then answer this foundational question: which freedoms should be protected, and which freedoms should be restricted for the sake of protecting other freedoms? The conception of negative liberty alone cannot in itself provide a principled answer to this question. Every restriction of one’s activity is a restriction of one’s negative liberty. How then can we determine when we should restrict negative liberty? As I will argue, providing a principled answer to this question ultimately proves to be an insuperable challenge for views that rely on a conception of freedom as negative liberty.

There are two prominent strategies for making this determination. First, some argue that though we cannot secure an absolute and unconditional right to negative liberty, we should attempt to maximize negative liberty. On this common view, we should restrict only those freedoms whose restriction results in freedom(s) being maximized overall. In the broadly libertarian tradition, Ian Carter gives a thorough argument for such a maximizing approach. Defining freedom as “the absence of preventing conditions on agents’ possible actions,”⁹ Carter argues that we can evaluate the overall freedom of groups of people by evaluating “the physical possibility of sets of actions.”¹⁰ A society will have greater overall freedom than another society when there are more choices available to those in the former society—when a greater

⁷Brennan 2012, 36.

⁸For example, Charles Murphy asserts that the “essence of the libertarian position” is that the government should not have the right to force anyone to do anything, “except for stringently limited functions, imposed under stringently limited conditions” (Murphy 1997, 5). For another example, Milton Friedman asserts that “the scope of government must be limited” (Friedman 2002, 2).

⁹Carter 1999, 5.

¹⁰Carter 1999, 245.

number of actions are possible for them. Maximizing overall freedom thus requires putting in place those restrictions on freedom that lead to the maximum amount of available choices.¹¹

Second, some appeal directly to other values beyond freedom in order to specify which freedoms should be prioritized over others. These views ground the value of freedom in some other, more fundamental value. With a view of this sort, those freedoms that further the more fundamental value beyond freedom are those that will be prioritized over others. There is a strong tradition of appealing to other values to make this specification within the broadly classical liberal and libertarian traditions. For example, J. S. Mill famously grounds a right to freedom from interference within his overarching utilitarian framework, where utility, understood “in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as progressive being” is “the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions.”¹² F. A. Hayek echoes Mill when he argues that freedom is valuable for the sake of progress, where progress is understood as a “process of learning” and applying our intellect to changing our environment to improve the human condition.¹³

Though these approaches make it possible to give some answer to the question of which freedoms should be prioritized over others, the answers provided are ultimately unsatisfying. To begin, both of these approaches face a serious problem specifying a meaningful and coherent way in which the calculations that each approach must rely on can be made. With the first approach, maximizing negative liberty requires that negative liberties be discrete and enumerable in a way that makes it possible for them to be counted and weighed against one another. There is good reason to doubt that our freedoms are exhaustively countable in any meaningful way, as there are infinite sets of possible actions that are extinguished and generated with every minuscule change in the world.¹⁴ Further, one might object that it is implau-

¹¹According to Carter, on the liberal view, “justified laws imply limitations of freedom to a certain extent and with a certain degree of probability, but are also often instrumental in promoting freedom or distributing it fairly, because their enforcement prevents certain cases of interference which would otherwise be realized, or more probably realized” (Carter 1999, 244).

¹²Mill 2006, 17.

¹³Hayek 1960, 41. Hayek argues that we value freedom for the sake of the general welfare (Hayek 1976, ch. 7).

¹⁴As Berlin puts it, “possibilities of action are not discrete entities like apples, which can be exhaustively enumerated” (Berlin 2002, 130). For Carter’s response to this objection, see Carter (1999, 174) and following. While Carter does resolve worries about the indefinite

sible to hold, as those who take this approach must, that we have any good reason to value more choice in itself. Instead, we primarily value freedoms qualitatively rather than quantitatively—we value some choices more than others and some choices not at all, a reality with which the maximizing approach is inconsistent.¹⁵ With the second approach, appeals to other values to prioritize freedoms will run into a similar problem whenever those other values are consequentialist in nature. Consequentialist theories presuppose that it is possible to meaningfully calculate which actions will be conducive to the greatest overall good. A standard criticism of these consequentialist views is that it is not possible to make a meaningful calculation of this sort, given our inevitable uncertainty about the future.¹⁶ Since counting freedoms and calculating the greatest good are so fraught with difficulties, both of these approaches are vulnerable to the criticism that they rely on calculations that are arbitrary and ad hoc, grounded on unexpressed preferences rather than objective measurements.¹⁷

Even more importantly, a right to freedom as negative liberty simply cannot in itself ground a unified and coherent system of rights. Superficially, a right to negative liberty promises to secure the intuitive right of each of us to decide for ourselves what we will do. But there is nothing internal to the conception of freedom as negative liberty that can specify the limits of this right: every restriction of my action is a restriction of my freedom, and freedoms inevitably come into conflict with one another. Nothing internal to the conception of freedom as negative liberty can differentiate those freedoms that should be protected from those that should be restricted. So, views that rely on a conception of freedom as negative liberty must find conceptual

subdivision of actions, indefinite descriptions of actions, and indefinite causal chains, those of us who think that there are in fact infinitely many actions available to any minimally free person are unlikely to find his responses here satisfying.

¹⁵Charles Taylor famously argues that negative liberty is “indefensible as a view of freedom” because this conception fails to capture freedom as we understand it (Taylor 1979, 179).

¹⁶See, for example, Grisez 1978. For a subtle and more recent critique of consequentialism, see Hurley 2011.

¹⁷The arbitrary nature of these calculations and the obscured underlying values that guide them open up views that rely on such calculations to the criticism that these views are often little more than ideology that reinforces existing capitalist class relations. To learn more about the way in which ideology reinforces existing class relations, see Karl Marx’s critique of ideology (1978). For an insightful contemporary explication of Marx’s critique of ideology, see Edwards (forthcoming).

resources elsewhere to prioritize some freedoms over others.¹⁸

Those who take the maximizing approach end up with the somewhat peculiar view that valuing freedom consists in valuing having more choices available to make. This idea of freedom as something that can be measured by counting the number of choices available is quite far from the intuitive idea of freedom as autonomy that draws many to a freedom-based theory of justice. Furthermore, with such a maximizing approach, there is no intrinsic connection between maximizing freedom of this sort and all of the essential rights we often think of as tied to a right to freedom. For example, on such a maximizing view, democracy is only valuable insofar as it maximizes empirical freedom of choice.¹⁹ Furthermore, one must give some account of why we should prioritize maximizing choices in this way. Some other value beyond this idea of freedom, then, must ultimately serve as the foundation for such a view.

When one appeals to other values, though, the right to freedom can no longer be the sole, self-sufficient foundation for a complete and coherent system of rights. The right to freedom depends for its worth on some other value, either instrumentally as a means to pursuing this larger good or as a partial component of this larger good. Either way, on such a view, the value of freedom derives from this other value, and so a right to freedom must be grounded in a convincing argument for this other value. While some may be satisfied with a right to freedom that cannot play a normatively foundational role, many will not be.

1.2 The Kantian Right to Freedom

I argue that those who are looking for an unconditional and foundational right to freedom should look instead to the Kantian conception of the right to freedom. The sole foundation of Immanuel Kant's political and legal theory is the innate right to freedom. On this view, "[f]reedom (independence from being constrained by another's choice), insofar as it can coexist with the freedom of every other in accordance with a universal law, is the only original

¹⁸Taylor makes a similar point, arguing that determining what constitutes an obstacle to freely acting necessarily involves judging whether that obstacle impedes an important purpose. See Taylor 1979, 182-83.

¹⁹Carter defends democracy because it tends to maximize freedom of choice, arguing that "democratic systems of government usually imply a greater extent of freedom for most people than do dictatorial ones" (Carter 1999, 239).

right belonging to every man by virtue of his humanity.”²⁰ The basic moral idea at the heart of Kant’s theory of right is that our actions in the external world that we share together must respect each other’s rational natures—our humanity. These external actions must be consistent with others choosing for themselves what they will do.

In this way, the Kantian right to freedom starts with the same intuitive idea that draws many to the conception of freedom as negative liberty: people have the right to act and live as they see fit. The Kantian right to freedom, though, is not a right of each to do whatever they want free from restriction. Instead, the Kantian right to freedom takes this intuitive element and spells out what it must entail if it is to serve as a foundation for a full and coherent set of rights: if we are each to have the right to decide for ourselves what we will do, then each other must also have the same right to decide for themselves what they will do. With a Kantian conception of the right to freedom, my right to freedom ends where others’ rights to freedom begin: my right to direct my own will in the world does not include a right to direct the wills of others.

The right to freedom is violated, then, whenever one chooses to act in the external world in a way that violates another person’s right to direct their own will in the world.²¹ The foundational principle of Kant’s political theory, the universal principle of right, commands that this right to freedom be respected.²² In the first instance, this right to freedom protects each person’s capacity to set ends: any actions that destroy, damage, or inhibit one’s rational capacity to set and pursue ends will violate the right to freedom.²³ For example, murdering another person will destroy that person’s rational capacity, violating their right to freedom. Drugging another person without their consent will inhibit that person’s rational capacity, also violating their right to freedom. Beyond these basic cases, any action through which one exerts control over another person’s free exercise of choice will also violate the right

²⁰Kant 1996, 6:237.

²¹“Right is therefore the sum of the conditions under which the choice of one can be united with the choice of another in accordance with a universal law of freedom” (Kant 1996, 6:230).

²²“Any action is right if it can coexist with everyone’s freedom in accordance with a universal law, or if on its maxim the freedom of choice of each can coexist with everyone’s freedom in accordance with a universal law” (Kant 1996, 6:230).

²³These examples are consistent with Ripstein’s account of the destruction of agency as one of two ways that the right to freedom can be violated. See Ripstein 2009, esp. 43–45.

to freedom.²⁴ When one person willfully assaults another, for example, one exerts direct control over that other person's body. Since we are embodied beings, we exercise our rational capacities in the world by way of our bodies. In exercising direct control over another's body, then, one prevents this other from setting and pursuing their own ends. Importantly, the right to freedom can be violated through both individual and group action—actions of groups of varying sizes, including state action, can violate a person's right to freedom.

As the foundation for Kant's theory of right, this one innate right to freedom gives rise to a complete and coherent system of rights. The right to freedom is the one innate right from which all other rights flow.²⁵ Since all rights derive from this one right, within the Kantian framework "a collision of duties and obligations is inconceivable."²⁶ Again, the right to freedom is the right to direct my own will in the world, which does not include a right to direct the wills of others. In this way, freedom is universalizable: the freedom of choice of each can be united with the free choice of every other in accordance with a universal law. So, different individuals' rights to freedom never come into conflict. This right to freedom is absolute and inviolable: since all rights derive from the one innate right to freedom, there are no other rights that can come into conflict with or be weighed against the right to freedom. The right to freedom is also inalienable: since it belongs to each person in virtue of her rational nature, so long as she has this rational nature, she will have the right to freedom.

Kant's political philosophy is broadly within the republican historical tradition, drawing on the work of other historical republican thinkers such as Rousseau. This Kantian conception of the right to freedom differs in important ways, though, from the conception of freedom as non-domination expressed by contemporary republican thinkers such as Philip Pettit.²⁷ Unlike the Kantian conception of the right to freedom, this contemporary republican conception of the right to freedom emphasizes freedom from domination from others rather than what I take to be the more basic right emphasized by the

²⁴My account here closely corresponds with Ripstein's account of the usurpation of agency as the second principal way in which the right to freedom can be violated. Ripstein 2009, esp. 43–45.

²⁵"With regard to what is innately, hence internally, mine or yours, there are not several rights; there is only one right" (Kant 1996, 6:238).

²⁶Kant 1996, 6:224.

²⁷See, e.g., Pettit 1997.

Kantian right to freedom: the right to be one's own master. Contemporary republican conceptions of the right to freedom also often focus on a list of basic liberties that are prioritized over other freedoms²⁸—this differs from the Kantian conception of the right to freedom in that there are no trade-offs of some freedoms for others within the Kantian framework. Because of these differences, it is useful to present the Kantian conception of the right to freedom on its own, rather than as simply a republican conception. Still, this Kantian conception of the right to freedom has a real affinity with republican conceptions of the right to freedom.²⁹

Importantly, this Kantian conception has considerable advantages over the conception of freedom as negative liberty. Again, both views start with the same rough intuitive idea: people should have the right to decide for themselves what they do and how they live their lives. Only the Kantian conception, though, can coherently capture what it would take to have a right of this sort: each person having the right to direct their own wills in the world means each person's right is also limited to directing their own wills in the world—they have no right to direct the wills of others. In this way, the innate right to freedom is universalizable: each person's freedom is consistent with the freedom of every other under a universal law. Within the Kantian framework, the right to freedom is the one innate right from which all others flow. Just as there is no conflict between different individuals' freedoms, there is no conflict between the specific rights that flow from the right to freedom.³⁰

A right to noninterference is not truly a right of each to direct their own wills in the world, as it includes the right to direct not only one's own will but also the wills of others. With such a view of freedom, each person's freedom is inevitably in conflict with the freedom of every other. There is nothing internal to the concept of freedom as negative liberty that can differentiate

²⁸See, for example, Pettit's list of basic liberties that should be established in every society. Pettit 2015, 72.

²⁹For a contrast between the republican thought of Kant and other historical republican thinkers, see Pettit 2013.

³⁰While there is no conflict between rights within a Kantian system, not all rights are fully determinate in the abstract, and these rights can be made determinate through mutually exclusive, compossible systems of rights. We must, for example, select a side of the road to drive on, and we must select a frequency of current to run our power grid on. In cases like these where our rights are equally compatible with multiple ways of doing things, our choice between these equally good options is binding because we make that choice together.

the actions that should be protected from those that should be restricted. So, again, views that rely on such a conception of freedom must find conceptual resources elsewhere to make these distinctions. A right to negative liberty will always be incomplete, and so cannot give rise to a unified, coherent, and complete system of rights in the way that the Kantian right to freedom can.

Since the Kantian conception of freedom has the conceptual resources to differentiate actions that should be permitted from those that should be prohibited, it gives rise to a more compelling account of rights violations. For example, consider again the case of assault. With a conception of freedom as negative liberty or noninterference, every restriction of my activity constitutes a restriction of my freedom. Prohibiting me from assaulting others, then, is a restriction of my freedom that we choose to put in place for the sake of something that we value more: securing those others' freedom from assault. The conception of freedom as negative liberty is not doing the most important work in this account; instead, the work is being done by whatever our reason is for valuing some freedoms more than others. The Kantian conception of the right to freedom, though, has the internal conceptual resources to give a complete account of rights violations. Each person has the right to direct their own will in the world, and this includes a right to control of one's own body. Assault exerts control over another person's will and body, violating their right to freedom. Prohibiting you from assaulting me does not restrict or violate your right to freedom—it simply secures mine. Your right to freedom ends where my right to freedom begins.

The differences between these two conceptions have important implications for how they view government action in general and government restriction of activity in the economic realm in particular. Again, with a conception of freedom as negative liberty, all restrictions of individuals' activity restrict their freedom. With such a conception of freedom, it makes sense that there would be a general presumption that government action should be kept to a minimum. If every interference with my activity is a restriction of my freedom, every government action that restricts my activity will be a restriction of my freedom. If this were so, and if we placed a high premium on a right to noninterference, then we would have a compelling reason to keep government action to a minimum. Libertarians and classical liberals extend this general presumption to the economic sphere, arguing that there should be minimal government interference in the economic realm.

With a Kantian conception of the right to freedom, though, there is no presumption that government action is an inherent evil that must be min-

imized to the greatest possible extent. On the Kantian view the role of government is to secure the right to freedom, and government action that secures the right to freedom does not restrict or violate anyone's right to freedom. Rather than a presumption against government action, there is a general requirement that there be government action whenever government action is required to secure the right to freedom. The right amount of government action is exactly that amount of government action that is required to secure the right to freedom, no more and no less. While government action that violates individuals' right to freedom must certainly be prohibited, we also must not fail to legislate when legislation is necessary to secure the right to freedom. So, in the economic realm, there is no presumption that government regulation in the economic realm should be minimized as much as possible. Instead, the appropriate amount of government action in the economic realm is whatever government or collective action is required to secure our right to freedom.

2 Socialism

Though many have very strong feelings about socialism, there is little widespread agreement or understanding concerning what socialism is. The difficulty of pinning down the exact nature of socialism has dogged proponents of socialist alternatives to capitalism from the beginning of the socialist movement. While Karl Marx's blistering critique of capitalism spanned thousands of pages, he famously said very little about what socialism is or could be. This reticence was deliberate, as Marx believed that determining the details of what each socialist society becomes should be the task of that nascent society at its particular place in history. Since then, autocratic regimes have invoked rhetoric of socialism to climb to power, perpetrating horrific human rights abuses in its name. Those who fervently believe that alternatives to capitalism must be found still argue for socialism, but even among these proponents of socialism there is disagreement concerning what the economic mechanism of a socialist society should be. As John Roemer observes, "with socialism we have primarily an ethical justification with no consensus upon the economic mechanism."³¹ As G. A. Cohen puts it, the main problem currently facing socialists is designing the institutions to make it work.³² For

³¹Roemer 2017, 265.

³²Cohen 2009, 57.

socialists, our problem is “our lack of a suitable organizational technology: our problem is a problem of design.”³³

In recent years, though, great strides have been taken by those who are looking to identify and explicate concrete socialist alternatives to capitalism. The task of this section is to describe what socialism has been, is, and could be in the future in a way that dispels popular misconceptions about what socialism must be. I will begin by articulating some of the most important principles and unifying ideas that many see as foundational to socialism. From there, I will go on to articulate the nature of existing so-called socialist regimes of the last century. I will then go on to discuss market socialism, which has been popular with many socialists in the last few decades. Finally, I will discuss more recent efforts to articulate a fully democratic socialist economic system.

2.1 Socialist Principles

Socialism is notable among other economic systems in that it came into being as an idea before it came to exist in the real world as an economic system. Socialists argued passionately for the abolition of capitalism and the creation of an alternative economic system that would accord with socialist principles. From the start, socialists demanded an economic system where the distribution of goods would be driven by noncapitalist principles, rallying behind now-famous slogans like “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”³⁴

Marx raised the cry of socialism louder, articulating in meticulous detail the fundamentally exploitative and dominating nature of the capitalist economic system.³⁵ Although, as noted above, Marx says little about the shape a socialist system should take, he does paint a vague but inspiring picture of what socialism could be; according to Marx, freedom in the sphere of social production

can consist only in this, that socialized man, the associated producers, govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control instead of being

³³Cohen 2009, 58.

³⁴For an insightful look at the history of socialist slogans, see Bovens and Lutz 2019.

³⁵See, most notably, Marx 1990. For a thorough explication of Marx’s critique of capitalism, see Wood 2004.

dominated by it as a blind power; accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature.³⁶

This and other brief statements gave rise to guiding ideas for the basic structure of a socialist economic system. Most importantly, the capitalist class structure must be eliminated. The elimination of the capitalist class structure of capitalists who profit from the labor of the working class occurs when it is no longer possible for capitalists to privately control the means of production, which are the resources with which we produce goods.³⁷ When workers control together the land, natural resources, and technology to produce together, they will no longer be exploited when they labor together to produce societal goods. Collective worker ownership of the means of production is thus a central feature of a socialist economic system.

Another unifying idea of socialist systems is that what we produce together and how goods are distributed in such a socialist system is driven by human need rather than greed. Adam Smith famously argued that self-interest drives capitalist production, as people look to profit from their interactions with one another in the capitalist market.³⁸ With socialist production, though, we collectively control what we produce, working to produce what we need and want rather than what will turn a profit.

Contemporary philosophers have posited a variety of foundational socialist principles that seek to embody this ideal of socialist production. G. A. Cohen, for example, argues for two foundational socialist principles: “an egalitarian principle and a principle of community.”³⁹ Cohen articulates his egalitarian principle as a principle of socialist equality of opportunity, under which inequalities in material welfare should “reflect nothing but difference of taste and choice, not differences in natural and social capacities and powers.”⁴⁰ The principle of community is a principle of communal reciprocity and fellowship, which requires that “people care about, and, where neces-

³⁶Karl Marx 1991, 959.

³⁷For an insightful discussion of the continuing importance of the means of production to contemporary political theory, see Edmundson 2019.

³⁸“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard for their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages” (Smith 1999, I.ii, 119).

³⁹Cohen 2009, 12.

⁴⁰Cohen 2009, 18.

sary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another.”⁴¹ Principles like these that express socialist ideas of equality, community, and self-realization are popular in many areas of contemporary socialist thought.⁴²

2.2 Really Existing Socialisms

After socialism began as varying sets of principles, governments created so-called socialist regimes that purported to enact these principles. Most notably, revolutions in Russia (in 1917) and China (in 1949) resulted in the establishment of states supposedly built on socialist principles. Though these “really existing socialist” states may have been founded with lofty ideals in mind, they quickly degraded under Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong into brutal autocratic regimes that perpetrated horrific human rights abuses on their citizenry. The economic organization of these societies was comprehensively centrally planned, where bureaucratic agencies of these single-party governments controlled the production and distribution of goods. Beyond being unacceptable for human rights reasons, these efforts at central planning failed, with the Soviet Union collapsing in 1991 and the People’s Republic of China devolving into a complex authoritarian form of state capitalism.

When many in the general public think of socialism (especially prior to the democratic socialist movement of recent years), these regimes and the atrocities they perpetrated in the name of socialism often come to mind. Importantly, though, those who argue for socialism today do not argue for socialism of this form. There is consensus among socialists that comprehensive central planning does not work, and there is uniform condemnation of autocratic and authoritarian regimes of this sort and their brutality. Rather than serving as examples of what socialism could be, the so-called socialist regimes in places like Russia and China serve as grim warnings of how powerful and inspiring rhetoric of genuine movements, like that of the socialist movement, can be co-opted to serve authoritarian ends by opportunistic despots. They also offer compelling reason to have much more detail in mind concerning how socialist economic activity can be successfully organized before overthrowing an existing economic system.

⁴¹Cohen 2009, 35.

⁴²For a survey of contemporary socialist principles, see section 3.1 of Gilabert and O’Neill 2019.

2.3 Market Socialism

Those still committed to the ideals of socialism but horrified by the evils perpetrated in its name searched for a socialist economic mechanism that could both effectively organize a society and avoid the authoritarian dangers of comprehensive centralized planning. For reasons like these, many socialists are drawn to market socialism, which promises to harness the power of the market as a noncapitalist mechanism for allocating goods in a way that is compatible with a robustly democratic system of government.

A market is a place or system in which goods and services are exchanged. In the most basic case, we can imagine a simple market where exchange is driven by human need: people bring their goods to market in order to exchange them for other goods that they need or want more.

Some, but not all, markets are capitalist in nature. Again, a capitalist economic system is characterized by a divided class system: a class of capitalists who own the means of production, and a class of workers who are separated from the means of production and have no choice but to labor for capitalists in exchange for wages, with which they can purchase what they need to sustain themselves. Within a capitalist economic system, capitalists invest the capital they control into a process of production to produce a product that can be sold for a quantity of money greater than the original capital investment. In this way, profit drives the production of goods: the capitalist market will encourage the production of goods that can be sold for a profit and discourage the production of unprofitable goods.

Market socialists seek to harness the productive power of the market without the exploitation of workers by capitalists inherent in the capitalist system.⁴³ Price signals guide production within a capitalist economic system: consumers show how much they value goods by paying for them, which determines which goods will be profitable to produce, which in turn orients capitalist production toward the production of those profitable goods. This price mechanism is a powerful informational tool that market socialists seek to retain for organizing production and distributing goods. Within a market socialist system, price signals still guide production, as production is still oriented toward profit.⁴⁴ However, within a market socialist system, the means

⁴³For an accessible and thorough explanation of Marx's critique of capitalist exploitation, see Wood 2004, ch. 16.

⁴⁴Importantly, market socialists argue that the nature of profit is different in a market socialism regime than it is in a capitalist regime. See, for example, Schweickart 2011, 51.

of production are owned by workers themselves, and there is no distinct capitalist class that exploits workers' labor for profit. Social production still receives the benefits of competition, as distinct worker-owned firms compete with one another for increased market share and profit. In addition, market socialist regimes typically include provision of a social minimum of resources that prevents individual workers from falling into conditions of dependence on others through measures such as a basic income guarantee.

Over the years, socialists have explicated a variety of visions of what a market socialist system could be. In the early twentieth century, Oskar Lange (1956) posited a market socialist system where central planners would control the direction of the price mechanism through a *tâtonnement* process, computing overall demand for each good and directing production accordingly. In the mid-twentieth century, James Meade (1965) expounded a liberal socialist vision of property-owning democracy, where a market economy would be tempered by aggressive investment in education and substantial redistributive taxation, an idea taken on and developed further as a socialist system by John Rawls.⁴⁵ To this day, many socialists continue to argue that the market can play an important role in realizing socialist ideals. For example, John Roemer, a leading proponent of market socialism, articulates a vision of market socialism free from exploitation, where the means of production are collectively owned, liquidating this ownership is prohibited, and wealth cannot be inherited.⁴⁶

2.4 NonMarket Economic Democracy

Many socialists, though, continue to seek a nonmarket mechanism for organizing economic life. Since comprehensive central planning is not a viable method of economic organization, these socialists seek to identify a non-market but still de-centralized mechanism for organizing the production and distribution of social goods. Many believe that the solution lies with a mechanism of de-centralized choice that we already know well: democracy.

In capitalist society, democratic governance is highly limited in scope. In societies like the United States, democratic rights and democratic decision making are limited to voting directly on a very narrow set of political questions and to electing representatives who make laws governing a range

⁴⁵For a comparison of Meade and Rawls's views, see O'Neill 2012, 79–81. For an in-depth discussion of Rawls's socialism, see Edmundson 2017.

⁴⁶See, e.g., Roemer 1994 and Roemer 2017.

of political questions. The economy is generally accepted as largely beyond the appropriate scope of democratic decision making. Socialists have long argued that democracy of this sort falls far short of any true democratic ideal, as a democratic process that does not govern economic matters does not exercise any meaningful control over the organization and direction of our social lives. As Vladimir Lenin famously put it, the scope of democracy in bourgeois society is to “decide once every few years which members of the ruling class is to repress and crush the people through parliament.”⁴⁷

A true democracy, then, requires democratic governance of the economic sphere. While some socialists argue that the market can be a legitimate expression of democratic self-government, others argue that the market mechanism is fundamentally incompatible with democracy. These proponents of economic democracy argue instead that the economy should be governed through deeper and more direct democratic mechanisms.

What, though, would such an economic system look like? Proponents of market socialism and robust economic democracy alike point to worker cooperatives as a foundational component of economic democracy. For a prominent real-world example of such a cooperative, many point to the Mondragon worker cooperative in the Basque region of Spain.⁴⁸ The Mondragon cooperative is owned and governed by many of the workers that constitute the cooperative, who democratically control the cooperative’s production, job creation, working conditions, and social environment.⁴⁹ For proponents of market socialism, economic democracy is realized when these worker self-managed firms compete with another in a market.⁵⁰ Others argue, though, that true economic democracy is inconsistent with markets guiding the production and distribution of social goods. Proponents of a system called participatory economics, for example, offer a vision where the production of these worker self-managed firms is directed democratically by worker and consumer councils rather than by a market.⁵¹ These councils and the individ-

⁴⁷Lenin 1976, 342.

⁴⁸For example, economist Richard Wolff (2012) points to the Mondragon Corporation as a prime example of what he calls a workers’ self-directed enterprise, which he sees as the foundation of economic democracy.

⁴⁹For information on the self-governance of the Mondragon Corporation, see <https://www.mondragon-corporation.com/en/about-us/governance/>.

⁵⁰See, for example, David Schweickart’s argument for economic democracy in the form of market socialism. Schweickart 2011, ch. 3.

⁵¹For a thorough articulation of and argument for participatory economics, see Albert 2003.

uals who compose them control production by choosing, in a reflective and socially aware manner, what they want to produce and consume.⁵² Instead of price signals and profit, democratic choice determines social production and consumption.

Visions of a thoroughly democratic economy are far from the economic systems we are familiar with, and are as a consequence often abstract and schematic. More and more, though, scholars, activists, and community organizers are exploring concrete methods of realizing these democratic socialist ideals. The Real Utopias Project, for example, has examined in detail fecund real-world examples of deeper, more robust democratic systems.⁵³ And currently, the growing movement of community wealth building is seeking to bring local economic development in line with democratic ideals.⁵⁴

As time goes on and interest grows, more and more democratic socialist alternatives to capitalism continue to sprout up. And as our technological resources continue to expand, we have more reason to hope that we will be able to fully specify an effective, de-centralized mechanism for governing our economy democratically.

3 Freedom and Socialism

With a richer understanding of both what it is to have a right to freedom and the nature of socialism, we are now in a position to consider what form of socialism could be compatible with this right to freedom. In this section, I will begin by sketching a rough outline of the constraints the right to freedom places on our choice of economic systems in general. Importantly, though this account rests on the foundational Kantian right to freedom, it is not based on the limited views of economic justice that Kant himself expressed.⁵⁵ Then,

⁵²Albert 2003, 91.

⁵³Fung and Wright 2003.

⁵⁴The work of the New Economics Foundation in Britain is especially interesting; see <https://neweconomics.org>. The Democracy Collaborative in the United States is also doing important work of this sort, see <https://democracycollaborative.org>; as is the Center for Local Economic Strategies in Britain, see <https://cles.org.uk/about/cles/>. For an insightful recent scholarly articulation of and argument for community wealth building, see Guinan and O'Neill 2020.

⁵⁵As I have argued elsewhere, fully understanding what economic rights the Kantian right to freedom entails requires starting fresh, so that we can take into account what we have learned about capitalism and economics generally in the time since Kant lived.

I will examine the socialist principles of the previous section, determining which are entailed by and which conflict with the right to freedom. Finally, I will evaluate whether each of the forms of socialism discussed in the previous section can be consistent with the right to freedom.

3.1 Freedom and Economic Choice

As embodied human beings, we depend on material resources for our survival. Since we must share our world together, we must have some system of ownership and exchange through which we structure our rightful relationships to one another with regard to these material resources. This regime of ownership and exchange specifies the way that we acquire rights with regard to objects and what sorts of rights to objects we can have within our society.

A key Marxist insight is that our economic system is something we create and maintain, and thus are responsible for. As Marx argues, economic systems such as feudalism and capitalism are propped up by ideology that indoctrinates those within the system into believing that their economic system is the natural and only way that society can be organized—if workers are convinced that they naturally belong and deserve to occupy their place within the capitalist system, they are more likely to passively accept that place no matter how impoverished it is.⁵⁶ While the force that maintains feudalist class relations, for example, is readily visible, the trick of capitalism is to obscure our agency in sustaining our capitalist economic system, thereby obscuring the existence of this choice and our responsibility for the consequences that follow from it. Further, as I have argued extensively elsewhere, there is nothing inherent in Kantian freedom or the nature of ownership that precludes the choice of noncapitalist, non-private systems of ownership.⁵⁷

If we must choose a system of ownership and exchange, then, what constraints does the right to freedom put on this choice? Just like any other choice, our choice of economic system must not violate the right to freedom:

See Love 2017. Still, some Kantians argue that Kant's own views of economic justice are more consistent with alternative economic systems than they might initially seem. See, for example, James 2016; and see also Williams 2013.

⁵⁶Marx 1978, 146–200. As Liam Murphy and Thomas Nagel explain, “the unreflective ideas that we have unqualified moral entitlement to what we earn in the market and that higher market returns are in some sense deserved as a reward arise naturally within the everyday outlook of participants in a capitalist economy” (Murphy and Nagel 2002, 36).

⁵⁷Love 2020.

our economic system must not violate each person's right to govern their own wills in the world, consistently with the rights of others to do the same. Again, with a Kantian conception of the right to freedom, not all government action restricts freedom, and so there is no general presumption that government activity should be minimized as much as possible. Instead, we have a duty to act together through our government in the ways that are required in order to secure the right to freedom. Rather than a general presumption that the government should stay out of economic affairs, the state must instead do whatever is required to secure the right to freedom in the economic realm.

This means, at the most basic level, that we may not put in place an economic system that generates avoidable conditions that undermine individuals' capacity and ability to set and pursue ends for themselves. To start, any rightful economic system must secure individuals' access to the basic resources required for agency.⁵⁸ If a system permits and upholds avoidable conditions of extreme poverty, the societal choice to maintain that system violates the freedom of those who are impoverished.

Beyond this, though, the right to freedom also consists in a right to self-government, which has important implications for how we structure our economic system. Part of what it is to have the right to freedom is for each of us to be fundamentally equal to all others, since we are all equal in our possession of the one innate and foundational right to freedom.⁵⁹ This right to freedom also consists partly in having a right to be one's own master.⁶⁰ Each has the right to govern their own wills, consistently with others' rights to do the same. This right will be violated whenever some have disproportionate, nonreciprocal control over the wills of others. Governmental authority is binding over all of us. If this authority is to be consistent with our right to freedom and the rights to equality and self-mastery that flow from it, this authority must derive from our own wills. For this reason, the right to freedom entails the right to equal democratic citizenship: each of us has the right to take an equal part in making the laws that govern all of us.⁶¹

⁵⁸Love, Unpublished manuscript, ch. 4.

⁵⁹Kant articulates three authorizations that the right to freedom involves, the first of which is "innate equality, that is, independence from being bound by others to more than one can in turn bind them" (Kant 1996, 6:238).

⁶⁰The second authorization contained within the right to freedom is "a human being's quality of being his own master" (Kant 1996, 6:238).

⁶¹Notably, Kant himself did not argue that citizens must give laws to themselves to democratic procedures, instead, he seemed to argue only that the laws must be such that

As a consequence, beyond a right to the basic resources required for agency, we also have a right to the basic socioeconomic resources required for equal democratic citizenship.⁶² Without basic material resources, education, and preparation for and access to the lawmaking apparatus itself, we have no meaningful right to equal democratic citizenship.⁶³ So, we must, through the state, secure access to these resources. In addition, inequalities that are so extreme that they are inconsistent with equal democratic citizenship must be precluded—no one can be so wealthy that they exercise disproportionate control over the direction of society.⁶⁴

This right to equal democratic citizenship and self-governance also constrains our choice in selecting an economic mechanism for producing and distributing societal resources. Again, though it may not always be obvious, one of the ways that we structure our lives together is through our economic and property system. This system organizes and specifies how we can rightfully interact with the world around us consistently with the freedom of others. The legal regime which creates and maintains this system thus is binding over us and governs our lives in fundamentally important ways. We have the right to take an equal part in making the decisions that are binding over us, including economic decisions. The economic mechanism that we put in place to organize the distribution and production of goods must be an exercise of our democratic choice.

In what follows, I will examine whether the ideas and forms of socialism discussed in the previous section are consistent with these constraints the right to freedom places on our choice of economic system.

3.2 Socialist Principles

What form of socialism, then, can be compatible with the right to freedom? We can begin by considering the foundational principles that any socialist system must have in order to be compatible with the right to freedom.

Again, a foundational feature of a robust socialist system is collective ownership of the means of production. In order to be compatible with the

citizens could have given these laws to themselves. For a recent discussion of Kant's views on democracy and a Kantian argument for democracy, see Hanisch 2016.

⁶²Love, Unpublished manuscript, ch. 6.

⁶³For arguments that reach similar conclusions within the Kantian framework, see, e.g., Holtman 2004 and Varden 2006.

⁶⁴Love, Unpublished manuscript, ch. 7.

right to freedom, a socialist system would need to have this foundational characteristic. If the means of production are owned by a subset of society, that subset controls the production and distribution of goods in that society. Those who own the means of production exercise disproportionate authority over those others who do not. This disproportionate authority is inconsistent with the right to freedom, as owners bind nonowners to more than those nonowners can in turn bind them. We cannot have equal democratic control over the economy if only some control the foundations of that economy.

Beyond this, the right to freedom also entails a foundational democratic socialist principle. In order to be consistent with the right to freedom, a socialist system must involve equal democratic control over the economy. The control our economic system exerts over us must be an exercise of our collective wills if it is to be consistent with the right we have to govern our own wills.

Importantly, other key principles that have been taken by many to be foundational socialist principles will not be entailed by the right to freedom. Notably, the right to freedom will not entail principles of community and fellowship. For example, consider G. A. Cohen's principle of community. Again, Cohen's principle of community requires that "people care about, and, where necessary and possible, care for, one another, and, too, care that they care about one another."⁶⁵ Principles of right, though, cannot require us to adopt and act from particular attitudes and motives. The right to freedom prohibits individuals, groups, and states from violating individuals' right to freedom—it prohibits acting in ways that are inconsistent with these individuals directing their own wills in the world. So long as I act in ways that respect the rights of others, I can perform those actions with whatever bad attitude I so choose. While we may have ethical duties to act from motives like fellowship and community (and perhaps this is what Cohen and others believe), a juridical requirement to act from motives of this sort would violate the right to freedom.

Furthermore, while the right to freedom also entails a certain principle of equality, it does not entail strict egalitarianism. Each has the equal right to the basic resources required for agency and the basic resources required for equal democratic citizenship. The right to freedom does not entail, though, that goods be distributed in a strictly egalitarian fashion. If we control the production and distribution of goods democratically, we may choose to

⁶⁵Cohen 2009, 35.

permit certain inequalities of material possessions so long as the right to basic resources is secured and the economy is democratically controlled.

Socialism that is consistent with the right to freedom, then, may look quite different from some of the visions many have had of what socialism could and should be. While there may be ethical duties that arise from principles of community, solidarity, and egalitarianism, such duties cannot be required as a matter of right. Instead, a socialism grounded in the right to freedom is fundamentally democratic in nature. It is up to us to decide together what we should produce and how we should distribute what we produce, consistent with two requirements: first, our choice must be consistent with the right to freedom of each person; and second, we must each have an equal say in making these decisions.

3.3 Really Existing Socialism

The so-called socialist regimes of the last century, such as the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, straightforwardly violate the right to freedom. Again, a socialism grounded in the right to freedom is fundamentally democratic in nature. These regimes were and are fundamentally undemocratic in nature. Grounding socialism on the right to freedom gives socialists powerful conceptual and normative tools to condemn oppressive regimes of all sorts, including those that are described as socialist.

3.4 Market Socialism

With these freedom-based socialism principles in mind, we can begin to investigate which socialist mechanisms for organizing the production and distribution of goods can be compatible with the right to freedom. Again, market socialism combines collective ownership of the means of production with a competitive market mechanism. As in a capitalist system, price signaling in the market directs the production and distribution of goods. Collective ownership of the means of production prevents capitalist exploitation, as there is no separate capitalist class to exploit workers.

Some standard criticisms of market socialism cannot find traction within the perspective of the right to freedom. One might argue, for example, that insofar as profit still motivates the production of goods within a market socialist society, market socialism undermines relations of fellowship, solidarity, and community. Again, as explained above, while there can be ethical duties

to relate to one another in these ways, the right to freedom cannot ground a rightful requirement that we foster relations of these sort. In a similar vein, one might argue that workers cannot flourish when they labor for the sake of profit rather than satisfying human need, as when profit mediates our relationships to one another our productive activities are divided from our social human nature.⁶⁶ Non-flourishing working conditions can be compatible with the right to freedom, though, so long as those conditions are consistent with each person's right to direct their own wills in the world.

Other prominent criticisms of market socialism can be grounded on the right to freedom, however. Market socialists envision a market that is controlled by democratic mechanisms that stave off conditions of exploitation and domination. The market, though, has an innate tendency to expand, as profit-seekers uncover new ways and places to make profit. In this way, market logic tends to spread to all aspects of society that it can. So, as the argument goes, a market would overrun the democratic process meant to control it and break free of the constraints placed upon it.⁶⁷ For this reason, many believe that a democratically governed market is a fantasy that could not exist for very long in reality, as the market socialist system would devolve again into capitalism. If a market could not be controlled democratically, it would be straightforwardly inconsistent with the democratic socialist principle articulated above and so incompatible with the right to freedom.

The right to freedom also provides the grounds for a distinct, freedom-based criticism of market socialism. Within a market socialist system, profit guides the production and distribution of goods. In this way, our economic lives are governed by this self-sustaining market mechanism. This condition is in tension with the democratic socialist principle articulated above. For that which governs us to be compatible with our right to direct our own wills, it must be the product of our wills. Even if we would choose through a democratic process to put a market in place, the right to freedom places limits on the choices we can legitimately make through democratic processes. While the right to freedom grounds such democratic procedures, it also restricts what we can authorize through these procedures. We cannot choose to put in place a system that would alienate our right to govern our economic lives, even if it would be easy or efficient to do so.

⁶⁶Bertell Ollman's critique of market socialism includes criticism along these lines. See Ollman 1998.

⁶⁷See, for example, Robin Hahnel's argument regarding the tension between markets and democracy. Hahnel 2009.

One might still think that a form of market socialism could be compatible with the right to freedom. One might imagine, for example, a market socialist system with extremely limited and closely governed markets confined to the production of specific goods and cordoned off from one another. One might think such markets would be so constrained that they could be prevented from overrunning their democratic limits. One might also think such markets could be so closely governed that the control they exert over the production and distribution of goods could be understood as the product of our democratic will.

In order to determine whether market socialism could be compatible with freedom, then, we must answer a series of questions: What would the nature of markets of this sort be? Could they be accurately described as markets in any meaningful sense, and would they have the informational advantages that serve as the rationale for having a market socialist system? Could we indefinitely control markets of this sort through democratic processes? Would democratic oversight of such markets be robust enough to constitute a true exercise of equal democratic self-governance? Given satisfactory answers to these questions, some form of market socialism might be compatible with the right to freedom.

v. NonMarket Economic Democracy

Those searching for an alternative to both market socialism and comprehensive central planning envision an alternative, robustly democratic socialist mechanism for controlling the production and distribution of goods. Such a system would harness the informational power of de-centralized individual choice through nonmarket means. Proponents of such a system envision a socialist system that avoids the inherent problems with markets while at the same time providing a real, workable alternative to the market mechanism of economic organization.

This system is meant to consist in democratic self-governance of our economic system. Beyond its potential for efficiency, such a system also represents an avenue through which we could control the direction of our economy by means of individual choices that are robust, reflective, and thus democratic in a way that market choices are not. Profit-driven markets promote impulsive and ill-informed choices. In contrast, legitimate democratic processes are designed to cultivate reflective choices that take into account the social consequences of these choices. Such a system could be compatible with the right to freedom, as it secures our right to equal democratic government of our economic system.

The challenge for proponents of a robustly democratic, nonmarket socialism is to articulate a compelling and sufficiently detailed vision of how such a system could operate. In the past, a nonmarket, deeply democratic mechanism for organizing our economy may have seemed nearly impossible. Current technology, though, offers enormous potential for devising and exploring economic mechanisms of this sort.

Imagine a system where we register our preferences for goods directly, avoiding the market and market exchange as intermediaries. For example, Robin Hahnel articulates a “participatory planning” mechanism for organizing production and allocation: participatory planning involves an annual planning procedure that determines, by means of individual choice,

which worker councils will use which productive resources, what those worker councils will use their primary and intermediate inputs to produce, how intermediate goods produced will be distributed among worker councils, and how consumption goods produced will be distributed among consumer councils and federations.⁶⁸

Individual democratic choice is a defining feature of participatory economics and governs the participatory planning process. Individuals propose their own plans for annual consumption and take an equal part in approving others’ plans as well as their council’s production plans.⁶⁹

This participatory planning model is one vision among many possible visions of what truly democratic socialism could look like, but it illustrates a general point. In the past, our technological infrastructure was not sophisticated enough to ensure the efficiency of such a process. Now, though, we already have technological tools we can employ to bring such a system to life. One could imagine, for example, a noncapitalist, Amazon-type system for registering one’s individual consumption plan. Think also of the relative ease with which one could complete a rough consumption plan for a month or even a year’s worth of groceries—we can already browse quickly through our previous online grocery orders, conveniently adding our usual staples to our carts. Sophisticated data analysis has the potential to reveal our con-

⁶⁸Hahnel and Wright 2016, 11.

⁶⁹For a description of this participatory planning mechanism, see Hahnel and Wright 2016, 11–16. See also Albert’s detailed description of the participatory economic system (2003). For a socialist criticism of participatory economics, see Wright 2010, 260–65.

sumption patterns to us and predict with a reasonable degree of accuracy how our needs may shift, both on the small and large scales.

As of now, there are substantial, largely untapped potential resources for devising robustly democratic mechanisms for controlling the production and distribution of goods. The right to freedom gives us compelling reason to assiduously search for democratic mechanisms of this sort.

4 Conclusion

In section 1, I argued that the right to freedom should be understood as a right to direct one's own will in the world consistently with others' rights to do the same. Only a right to freedom of this sort can coherently capture what it is to have a true right to autonomous self-direction, as a right to self-direction is incomplete unless all others are obligated to respect it. The Kantian right to freedom can serve as the sole foundation for a complete and coherent set of rights—a right to negative liberty cannot.

In section 2, I articulated a number of visions of what socialism is and could be. Finally, in section 3, I explored which features a socialist system would need to have in order to be compatible with the right to freedom. As I argued, a socialist system grounded on the right to freedom is not strictly egalitarian and does not demand that we act from norms of fellowship, solidarity, or community. Instead, a freedom-based socialism is deeply democratic. Those of us who value the right to freedom thus have good reason to continue to seek deeply democratic mechanisms for organizing the production and allocation of goods.

For so long, socialism has been thought by many to be incompatible with the right to freedom, understood as a right to decide for oneself what one does and how one lives. When we think more deeply about what a right to freedom of this sort must be and rethink what socialism can be, though, we see that socialism is indeed compatible with the right to freedom.

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