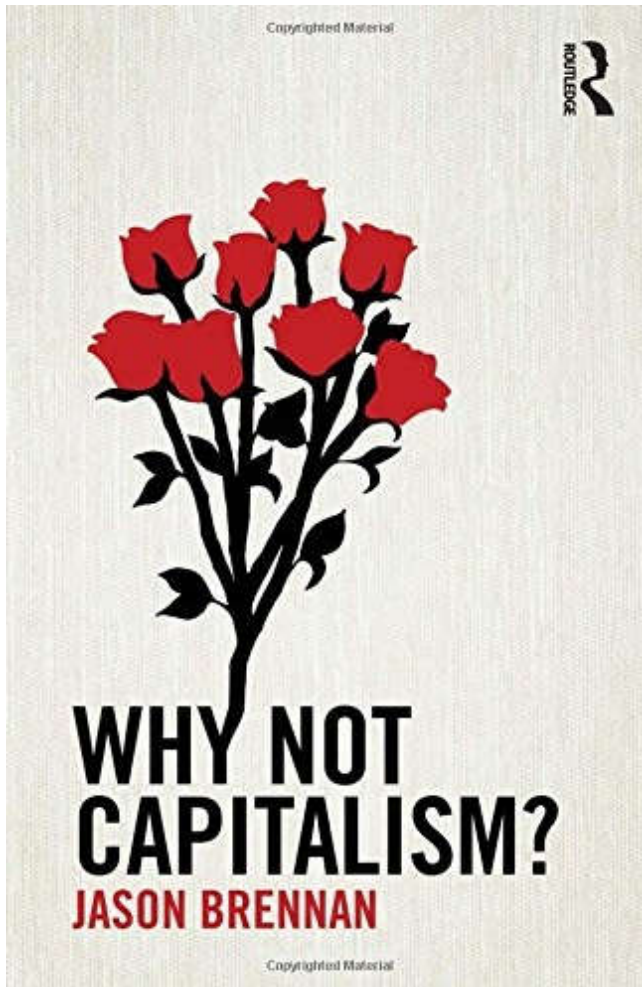


By Bryan Caplan

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The noble and prolific Jason Brennan has just released *Why Not Capitalism?*, a short book replying to Gerald Cohen's *Why Not Socialism?* Outstanding work, as usual. For me, the highlight is Brennan's explanation for why even cartoonishly nice people would want to own private property. It's easy to see why cartoonishly nice people – classic Disney characters like Mickey and Minnie Mouse – would want *other* people to own private property. But why would the nicest people imaginable want to claim ownership on their own behalf?

It's not just that Minnie, Donald, and Willie want exclusive use-rights over objects. They also want to be able to use, give-away, sell, and in some cases, destroy these objects, as part of their pursuit of their visions of the good life. It means something for Minnie to be able to sell bows to others – that others are willing to buy from her *because they like the bows* rather than as a favor to her. It means something to Clarabelle that she can choose to sell her muffins or instead give them for free to a sick friend. And so on.

But but but...

Some philosophers – themselves never having owned a business – might have a hard time understanding these kinds of desires. But if that philosopher can understand why one might want to write a book by oneself, rather than with co-authors or by committee, the philosopher can similarly understand why someone might want to own a factory or a farm or a store. Or, if an artist can understand why one might want to paint my oneself, rather than having each brushstroke decided by committee, or rather than having to produce each painting collectively, then the artist can similarly understand why someone might want to own a factory or a farm or a store.

Furthermore:

Another closely related reason for having private property, even in utopia, has to do with the sheer aggravation of always having to ask permission. Imagine everything belonged to everybody. Now imagine everyone loves each other very much. Still, every time you go to use something, you'd have to check and see if anyone else needed or wanted to use it. ("Hey, does anyone need the laptop right now?") Or, otherwise, we'd have to develop conventions such that you knew, without asking permission, that you could use particular things at certain times. ("Oh, good, it's 6 p.m., now it's my turn to use one of the village laptops.") There's something deeply annoying about both of these scenarios, even if we love others as much as we love ourselves. We want to have a range of objects that we can count on to be free to use *at will*, without first having to ask permission or check with others or follow a schedule...

Simply put:

People have a need to feel "at home" in the world. Most of us feel "at home" in our homes because we may unilaterally shape our homes to reflect our preferences. Our homes are governed by the principles we endorse. We do not have to deliberate in public and justify our furniture arrangements to others in society. To the extent that we have private property, we acquire the means to carve out a space for ourselves in which we can be at home.

My main complaint about *Why Not Capitalism?* is that Brennan doesn't take Cohen to task for conflating voluntary and involuntary socialism. Cohen's book builds on a thought experiment about a socialist camping trip. The only reason the trip sounds nice – or even bearable – is that campers' socialism is *voluntary*. If Cohen presented a thought experiment about a camping party that inducts dissident passersby at gunpoint, almost everyone would draw an anti-socialist lesson. And when people evaluate socialism in the real world, involuntary socialism is almost always what they have in mind.

Furthermore, there's a simple way to make even Cohen's voluntary socialism unappealing: just make the campers' commune pushy and demanding. E.g., a stranger walks by the camp site minding his own business, and the voluntary socialists start preaching, "Join us! We won't force you, but you're morally obliged to join us and do whatever a majority of us say. You're selfish – selfish – unless you join. Come on, pitch in. Do it. Do it. Do it!" **The awesome leftists of Bad Religion** get it; why doesn't Cohen?