Is socialism desirable? Is it even possible? In this concise book, one of the world's leading political philosophers presents with clarity and wit a compelling moral case for socialism and argues that the obstacles in its way are exaggerated.

There are times, G. A. Cohen notes, when we all behave like socialists. On a camping trip, for example, campers wouldn't dream of charging each other to use a soccer ball or for fish that they happened to catch. Campers do not give merely to get, but relate to each other in a spirit of equality and community. Would such socialist norms be desirable across society as a whole? Why not? Whole societies may differ from camping trips, but it is still attractive when people treat each other with the equal regard that such trips exhibit.

But, however desirable it may be, many claim that socialism is impossible. Cohen writes that the biggest obstacle to socialism isn't, as often argued, intractable human selfishness--it's rather the lack of obvious means to harness the human generosity that is there. Lacking those means, we rely on the market. But there are many ways of confining the sway of the market: there are desirable changes that can move us toward a socialist society in which, to quote Albert Einstein, humanity has overcome and advanced beyond the predatory stage of human development.

My Personal Review:
As with all of his other works, "Why Not Socialism?" is sharp and meticulously argued. I found it to be an extremely quick and enjoyable read. It very neatly captures the ethical core of what animates the socialist complaint against capitalism. Succinctly put, Cohen's short book is simply a straightforward argument that has a great deal of intuitive appeal. We're spared the propagandistic appeals and empty rhetoric that so often accompany arguments for or against socialism. Cohen effortlessly navigates through the terrain of debates about equality of opportunity and the value of community, showing all along the way where you may get off the bus if you please. On my view, however, that Cohen's book is so honest in showing where it's own weak points are only makes the overall force of the book more convincing.
Of course, the intuitive character of the argument will no doubt anger many on the political Right who would prefer that capitalism were simply taken for granted rather than subject to critical scrutiny. Those on the Right will be threatened by the intuitive appeal of a political ideal that they've invested decades attempting to dissuade people from thinking about seriously. Moreover, as is the case with Cohen's other works (particularly his "Self Ownership, Freedom and Equality"), it is not taken for granted in this book that those on the Right have a monopoly on the language of freedom, community and equality. On the contrary, the clearest upshot of Cohen's argument is that these values themselves (i.e. freedom and equality) are effaced by capitalism's ruthless pursuit of profit.

Now, the majority of ordinary people in contemporary capitalist societies today do not need to be persuaded that there are options more desirable than the disastrous force of laissez-faire; this much is obvious. But I particularly like that Cohen is honest here in making clear there is no magic fix for the systemic problems generated by capitalism. That is, there are no easy, ready-made solutions detailing how to organize a society according to socialist principles. Like anything else worth doing, working out the technological/institutional details would take a lot of work. But this hardly means that we cannot ever devise such institutional arrangements; accepting that we cannot would be like claiming in 1920 that we could never put a human being on the moon. Moreover, the prudential considerations here say nothing of the worthiness of the principles defended in the book themselves. We have little reason to think that capitalism is simply the best that humanity can do, and Cohen makes the case for thinking through the principles of greatest importance to us that could form the basis for a freer, more democratic, less unequal society.