Socialism and the Collective Ownership of the Means of Production

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Section One: Introduction

Historically, socialism has been closely related with the collective control and ownership of the means of production. For instance, Eugene Debs has said (1918):

> I believe, as all Socialists do, that all things that are jointly needed and used ought to be jointly owned.

Or here's GDH Cole in his *History of Socialist Thought* (1953/1965, 4):

> Socialism, as the word was first used, meant collective regulation of men's affairs on a co-operative basis.

More recently, Erik Olin Wright said that (2010, 121):

> Socialism is an economic structure within which the means of production are socially owned and the allocation and use of resources for different social purposes is accomplished through the exercise of what can be termed "social power."

Some theorists, especially in the early twentieth century, opted for a peculiarly strong version of this relationship, simply identifying socialism with collective ownership of the means of production.[1] Call this strong version *ownership fundamentalism.* To many it seems too strong. Ownership structures tell us who is permitted to use and transfer resources. It seems hardly plausible that collective ownership is the only thing that socialists should fundamentally value. To identify socialism exclusively with collective ownership of the means of production is to fetishize ownership.

A second view of what socialism is emerges from the purported failures of the central command economies, and influential arguments about the necessity of markets for organising production in complex, large-scale societies. In an attempt to rescue socialism from what they perceived to be discredited economics, these socialists identify socialism with a set of values, usually some demanding form of equality of opportunity, and then argue that the question as to what economic arrangement realizes those values is a separate matter. A good statement of the sort of view we have in mind is provided by John Roemer (1994, 124):

[1] See Taylor, F. 1938 (1964), 43); Lange, O. 1938 (1964), 72; Einstein 1949.

> ...the goal of socialism is best thought of as a kind of egalitarianism, not the implementation of a specific property relation.

Thus, in Roemer's view, socialism should be identified with a value, in his case a version of egalitarianism, where this value is not tied to any particular form of property relationship. On this view, it is an open question as to whether socialism calls for collective ownership or something else altogether (Roemer 1994, 456):

> Socialists should advocate those property relations in productive assets that will bring about a society that ranks highest according to their preferences over the [relevant kinds of equality]. One cannot say, at this point in history, that one knows what those property rights must be.

Call this approach, *ownership instrumentalism.*

While this move away from ownership is understandable, we think it is a mistake – the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. If socialism is identified with equality and the question as to what realises equality is left open, then socialism is indistinguishable from liberal egalitarianism. Far from showing a 'future for socialism', this separation of axiology from economics threatens to show that socialism is all but dead, apart from a residual commitment to an egalitarianism shared by other traditions.

In this paper, we provide an alternative to ownership fundamentalism and ownership instrumentalism. In our view, the heart of socialism is a thick relational ideal that involves, but is not reducible to, an economic and juridical structure describable as collective ownership of the means of production. Our argument has three main steps. First, we argue that the heart of socialism is an ideal of caring solidarity. The idea of caring solidarity enjoins us to engage in the shared activity of caring about one another, or in other words, to do what we can to meet others' needs collaboratively. Second, we argue that caring solidarity constitutively involves collective planning of the means of production, and that planning is possible only if there is collective control of those means. Third, we argue that that collective control is incompatible with private ownership of the means of production, but instead would[2] constitutively involve collective ownership. Hence socialism, as caring solidarity, would constitutively involve the collective ownership of the means of production.

The paper proceeds as follows. We start (§2) by describing the ideal of caring solidarity. We then argue (§3) that socialism (as caring solidarity)

[2] This conditional qualification signifies that this involvement is a normative rather than metaphysical necessity. Details in §4.1.

constitutively involves collective planning of the means of production, and that collective planning is in turn possible only if there is collective control of those means. Next, we argue (§4) that collective control would involve collective ownership and not private ownership of the means of production. §5 replies to some objections.

Before proceeding, a clarification of our aim. What follows is not a decisive case either for Socialism as caring solidarity, or for collective ownership of the means of production. Our aim is to show that socialism as caring solidarity is a prima facie plausible interpretation of an important strand in socialist axiology, and that socialism so considered constitutively involves collective planning of the means of production and would involve collective control and ownership of those means.

This conclusion is consistent with thinking that other considerations favour private ownership and markets. It is also consistent with rejecting the ideal of socialism as caring solidarity, either as a plausible interpretation of something that deserves to be called 'Socialism' or, granting that, as a plausible account of a desirable social ideal.

To some extent these issues will turn on an argument that we do not directly defend here: that living in caring solidarity is an important part of human flourishing, and that this fact is sufficient grounds for authorising the organisation of society along these lines, and hence, if the argument of this paper is correct, for collective ownership of the means of production. Here we just argue for the intervening conditional relationship. To the extent that you find our ideal of socialism attractive, on any grounds, we hope to persuade you that socialism would involve collective ownership of the means of production – and hence that private ownership of the means of production necessarily involves a sacrifice of something valuable.[3]

Section Two: Caring Solidarity

We start with the relationship that we think is at the heart of the socialist ideal. The ideal of *caring solidarity* is a complex of mutual care and solidary collaboration. This approach emphasizes our positive responsibilities together and to one another, rather than simply criticizing various negative aspects of capitalism.

[3] To our knowledge, there is no straightforward defence of collective ownership along the lines offered in this paper in socialist theory. However, an increasing number of theorists share our ambition to argue for greater socialisation of production, often based on a frustration with pure ownership instrumentalism. This includes non-alienation theorists (Kandiyali 2020; Maguire 2022; Brixel 2024); non-domination theorists (Vrousalis 2022; O'Shea 2019; Gourevitch 2013); some liberal socialists (Hebenton & O'Neill 2024; Gilabert 2023); and some self-authorship theorists (esp. Cordelli 2025).

2.1 Care

It is standardly held that caring about someone involves doing what you can to meet their needs.[4] This is a deep and underappreciated point of connection between care ethics and socialist ethics. The emphasis on care supports an interpretation of the famous principle – *from each according to their abilities to each according to their needs* – as articulating an *intentional* relationship between agents: one in which an agent is robustly and intrinsically motivated to do what they can to recognisably meet some particular needs.

In being intrinsically motivated, one is motivated to meet the need for its own sake, not merely as a means to something else (such as meeting one's own need to meet a need, though one might be motivated by that, too). This motivation is also robust, since it is not conditional on other things one wants.[5]

In addition to being intrinsically motivated by needs, one is also *attentive* to the relevant needs. Caring is a participant rather than observational activity, an "engrossment" in the other, one that involves really listening, and taking the other's views about their needs seriously. This kind of humble responsiveness to the other constitutes *agent respect*.[6]

2.2 From Care to Solidarity to Caring Solidarity

Now to a limitation of care as the sole basis for characterizing the socialist ideal. Care usually involves a clear self-other distinction. One person caring about another is an asymmetric relationship, as is clear from one paradigmatic caring relationship, namely, a parent caring for a child. This asymmetry is consistent with the fact that care involves agent respect. For A might care about B, respectfully, even though B doesn't care about A. The cared-for may willingly volunteer authentic information about their needs, and they may accept assistance. But they may not otherwise facilitate their being cared-for.

At this point, we will draw on the account of solidarity as a shared activity developed by Andrea Sangiovanni (2023). On this account, we act in solidarity when, as a result of identifying with one another, we each intend to participate to overcome significant adversity by pursuing a shared goal; we are individually committed to relevant ends and means

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[4] E.g. Joan Tronto (*1994, 105*), Virginia Held (2006, 10).

[5] One's particular motivation is not thereby *unconditional*, however, given the possibility of conflict with other specific commitments. Our ideal of intrinsic motivation is compatible with denying that one is motivated by them *merely* as an end, for one sees them as an *end with ends* – as a fellow participant in socialist community. See Lenman 2001.

[6] On the relationship between agent respect and paternalism, see Kittay (2019, 208) and following. We return to this issue briefly in §2.4.

and to 'not bypassing each other's will' in pursuing them; we are committed to sharing our fate in relevant ways; and we trust one another to meet all these conditions. This approach involves starting with a 'we' perspective and consequently seeing one's own responsibilities as a way to participate in a larger collaborative enterprise in which one trusts others to uphold their responsibilities similarly in turn.

But now consider a limitation of solidarity. The end of solidary activity can be just about anything. There can be solidarity amongst mafia members, thieves, and so on.[7]

By contrast, the socialist ideal is a relationship in which agents care about one another together – i.e. in which they care about one another in suitably structured collaborations. So, we need a model in which the end of solidarity activity is not merely something *external*, like building a dam against rising sea levels or repelling an invading force from our village. It has to be something *internal*: the end is a certain kind of activity, specifically, an activity that sustains a certain way of living together.[8] We suggest that *caring about one another* is the relevant end of solidary activity. The proposal is that, in the socialist ideal, we have solidarity in mutual care – or for short, *caring solidarity.*

To further specify this ideal, consider two different ways in which we can understand the joint activity of caring about one another. On the first, the joint activity simply enables individuals to care about each other; it does not itself constitute a form of care. It follows that if we could enable people to care another way, that is, without the joint activity, nothing would be lost. As an example, one might consider a neighbourhood watch scheme where the joint activity is merely instrumental to the goal of personal safety. If each house having its own guard dog would better achieve that end, the shelving of the scheme would involve no loss. On the second view, by contrast, the joint activity does not merely enable care but is itself one of caring about one another. To continue the above example, suppose the neighbourhood watch scheme is initially set up as a means to achieve personal safety but over time evolves into something different: an association where people do what they can to help each other out in collaboration with like-minded neighbours. If the scheme is shelved at this point, something of value has been lost. Caring solidarity is a joint activity of the second kind.

2.3 The Vital Need

To care about someone is to do what one can do to meet their needs. However, we do not assume care is responsive only to (any characterisation of) *basic* needs. In this section we make a few general

[7] For discussion, see Sangiovanni (2023, 111).
[8] Brudney (1998, 188).

remarks about how we are understanding needs and then introduce one substantive commitment.

We assume that one's needs are the conditions that must be met in order for to flourish. This is an assumption with a venerable heritage, running through Aristotle, Hegel, Marx, and more recently, the work of David Wiggins and Eva Kittay.[9] Our needs can be quite expansive, corresponding to the broad range of activities that can constitute our flourishing; these can, for example, include needs associated with a range of aesthetic, intellectual, and creative ideals.

Among these needs, presumably, are needs to satisfy *personal* interests, i.e. interests that are not even indirectly concerned with the flourishing of others. Of course, we meet some of our personal needs by meeting the needs of others. I like mountains so I'm a mountain rescuer, you like cooking so you are a chef. Large swathes of seemingly personal interests depend in interesting ways on underlying commitments to meet the needs of people in the future.[10]

Our view is compatible with the natural thought that some of our needs are *purely* personal. However, we assume that not all of our needs are purely personal in this way. In particular we make the substantive assumption that people have a need to live in caring solidarity with others. This is a need to meet the needs of others as participants in larger collaborations doing the same. With a nod towards the early Marx, we will call this need the *vital need*.

While there is empirical evidence for the vital need, we do not put it forward as an empirical conjecture.[11] It is more like a normative aspiration. In caring solidarity, we assume that others have a need to meet needs. Consequently, caring for them is not only a matter of meeting their consumption needs (narrowly conceived) but of putting them in the position where they can meet the needs of others. Without the assumption of the vital need, we may seek to care for people by simply bestowing benefits upon them, thereby neglecting their need to meet the need of others.

The vital need has an important implication for our argument. Since the need is presumed to be shared by all, it follows that the act of putting someone in the position where they can care for someone else is itself an activity of caring for *them*. Thus, when I provide you with a means of production necessary to meet the needs of someone else, that satisfies my need to meet the need of others.

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[9] Wiggins 2009, Kittay 2019.

[10] Cf. Samuel Scheffler 2013.

[11] Although we do think the vital need is common, and would be even more so in an economic system that supported rather than inhibited it.

Finally, if we grant the assumption that we have a need to meet needs, and that needs are the conditions that must be met in order to flourish, it would also follow that living in caring solidarity would itself contribute to our flourishing. This provides an additional argument for socialism as caring solidarity, and collective ownership of the means of production as a requirement of caring solidarity. However, while we find the claim that we would flourish by living in caring solidarity plausible, it is not essential to our argument that socialism would involve the collective control and ownership of the means of production.

Section Three: From Caring Solidarity to Collective Planning and Collective Control of the Means of Production

Now we elucidate the connections between caring solidarity, collective planning, and collective control of the means of production.

3.1 Care and Empowerment

Let us start with a rather obvious point about care. Sometimes we may do what we can to meet the need of others but fail to meet those needs because we lack the resources to do so successfully.[12] We distinguish *latent* care from care, where there is latent care when the general motivational conditions of care are met but without what is needed to care. For example, with the best will in the world, a doctor cannot care for their patients without the required technology and support (both from their community and other health care professionals). A civil engineer cannot care for their community in their work without the support of a large well-provisioned team.

Now there are numerous ways in which individuals can come about whatever they need to care for others. For instance, I may get the resources I need to care for you by threat or force, by distribution from an all-powerful despot, or by manna from heaven. In these cases, I can care for you, but the transfer of the resources does not itself constitute a form of care. In fact, some of the ways of transferring resources may seem distinctly *uncaring*. However, we can contrast such cases with others where what one needs to care about others is intentionally provided to one for that very purpose. In such cases, the transfer of resources itself constitutes a form of care. We call such cases *empowerment*. We enter the following definition:

> *Empowerment*: to *empower* someone to care about someone with some relevant needs is to intentionally put them in a position such

[12] Alternatively, one might have the resources but lack uptake from the would-be recipient of care; set this aside.

that, if they care latently about meeting those needs (and there is suitable uptake), then they are able to meet those needs.

Let us mention two important aspects of empowerment: that it is intentional and teleological.[13]

First, empowerment is teleological: empowerment is *for a specific end*, namely to care about someone's specific needs.[14] There is a crucial contrast here with provisioning resources for discretionary use, such as Rawlsian primary goods.[15] Rawlsian primary goods are all-purpose means to pursue reasonable ends that individuals elect by exercising their own discretion in isolation. By contrast, empowerments are need-specific. Training someone as a doctor empowers them. Likewise paternity leave. Likewise giving someone access to a JCB, or a library, or the school kitchen. Unlike primary goods, empowerments are teleological, with the ends in question (corresponding to needs) presumed to be more finely grained.

Second, we empower one another intentionally. This intentionality is constitutive both of care and of solidarity, and hence of caring solidarity. It is constitutive of care given the importance of being directly motivated by a need, attentive to those with the need, and respectful of their take. It is constitutive of solidarity given the identification condition, the shared activity condition, and the shared fates condition. One implication of this intentionality condition is that there is an important loss when the distributing mechanism operates 'invisibly' – as the market famously does.

3.2 From Caring to Planning

Now care is not a property of actions in isolation but a sustained mode of engagement with others.[16] This requires not merely one-off intentions but *plans*.[17] To manifest care in serving someone, certain counterfactuals need

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[13] Some further conceptual issues. One might question whether all empowerment *manifests* care and whether all empowerment is *to* care. We will mostly assume that empowerment manifests care about others caring, but we see no reason to insist on this linguistically. There is also a question about whether all empowerment is to meet someone's need directly rather than to make a contribution to some larger effort that meets the needs of a group. We assume the latter is possible, and indeed, common. N.B. empowerment concerns power rather than authority. For instance, even if there is an authoritative rule according to which A1 lacks a proper claim on some resource R, A1 might still empower A2 with R, e.g. by stealing it.

[14] This is not to say that individuals are compelled to care in some highly specific way. Rather, empowerment involves resources that enable engagement in the activity, but they may not *only* enable engagement in *that* activity under some highly specific description. Care is respectful; individuals are empowered to care in the light of their own values and abilities. Cf. Kittay (2019, 208).

[15] Cf. Pallikkathayil 2010. There is also a contrast here with Gilabert's conception of "solidaristic empowerment" which is discretionary rather than teleological (*op. cit.*).

[16] Cf. Frankfurt 1982.

[17] Cf. Morton 2023 and Bratman on plan-theoretic shared policies, 2022, 4-5 and 20.

to be true: had things been a little different this way or that, one would still have served them.[18] These counterfactuals are explained by the constitutive role of planning in care.[19] A plan state is a commitment to certain activities in the future. Some are for simple individual imminent actions: e.g. to read a paper on the train. Some are for complex shared activities extended into the future: e.g. planning to establish an interdisciplinary global research network studying alternative models of ownership. Plans help to control future action, and possible contingencies; they help to coordinate behaviour with others; and then settle what to do in cases of competing considerations (cf. Bratman 1987).

In addition to these functions, three additional features of plans are worth making explicit here.

First, plans are layered and scalable. We plan to increase teaching and research in the humanities; so, we plan to hire more humanities scholars; so, we plan to establish a committee with suitable hiring procedures; and so on. Likewise, the plan to boost the humanities might be related to a larger plan to increase democratic engagement across society; this, in turn, might be part of a larger plan to live in caring solidarity with one another.

Second, planning generates trust. As Shapiro has pointed out (2011, 133):

> Plans …compensate for…lack of trust by greatly simplifying the decision-making procedure. Instead of having to arrive at an all-things-considered judgement about what to do, participants can focus on the same few variables and, as a result, make better choices, or at least ones that cohere well with those of others.

The ideal of caring solidarity involves mutual trust: one sees others as fellow participants, and acts on the basis of normative rather than merely descriptive expectations about their behaviour. Plans facilitate and coordinate this mutual reliance.

Third, and relatedly, planning yields a valuable kind of social stability. As Bratman says (1983), 'To be stable is, in part, to resist reconsideration.' Given the prospect of dense, dynamic, and variably scaled plans, collective planning will progressively and transparently yield social structures that are stable.

3.3 Defining the Means of Production

[18] Cf. Maguire 2022.

[19] Distinguish plans as socio-psychological planning states from plans as abstract structures. We use 'plan' to refer to the former (cf. Bratman 1983, 271).

We have said that care involves planning with the resources (broadly construed) that are used to meet one another's needs. Now we submit that these resources *are* the means of production. This is either direct, as when we need resources to meet a personal need, or indirect, when we need resources to meet the vital need. To elaborate on the latter: insofar as we are caring about others meeting needs, we provision them with what they need to do so. What they need is among the means of production. Hence meeting the needs of others involves providing them with the means of production they need to meet the needs of others. Insofar as we are collectively engaged in a process of meeting one another's needs, the resources we collectively employ in doing so are the means of production. Hence, we offer, as a stipulative definition, that the means of production are whatever resources we might use to empower needs-meeting.[20]

Since we understand needs in an expansive way, corresponding to the broad range of activities that can constitute our flourishing, it follows that what counts as the means of production will be quite broad. They will include everything that we need to meet one another's needs: raw materials, physical and technological infrastructures, and the mental and physical abilities we exercise in production (along with all the laptops, hi-vis jackets, and stethoscopes we need). They will also include a range of needs met in non-professional contexts, including the care and support of the young, infirm, and elderly.

At the same time, since the means of production have a definite end – viz., empowering needs-meeting – it follows that the means of production do not extend to resources that do not meet needs. Resources that are required to produce chemical weapons or useless consumer goods will not count, for instance. We think this is substantively the right result.[21]

Are the means of production distinguished from the means of consumption? Three points here. Firstly, if consumption is the elimination of resources in meeting a need, then, insofar as resources are eliminated in meeting the need to meet needs, those resources are means both to production and consumption.[22] Secondly, bear in mind that production is more extensive than paid labour in contemporary society; the means of production include empowerments to engage in domestic and reproductive labour and personal care work. Thirdly, notice that the caring solidarity principle plausibly applies as a moral principle in personal contexts: e.g. as a principle for cutting up a birthday cake into slices. By contrast with an approach in which things are produced in a market and consumed privately, the distinction is not particularly important in the current context.

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[20] Might use? Depending on how broadly we understand this modal, the definition will be more or less expansive. We set this question aside for now.

[21] For alternative accounts of the means of production, see Cohen 1978, p.32 and Edmundson 2020.

[22] Interestingly, one can find this argument in Gauthier 1987, 335 and following.

3.4 What is planned? How is it planned?

Now in caring solidarity one of the things we are planning together is how to sustain this very activity. We are planning in part how to assign the resources we need to sustain a particular way of life. This requires us to plan which needs should be met, when those needs should be met, how those needs should be met, and by whom the needs should be met by (for some will be better placed to meet needs than others).[23] Planning what strategy to use to meet needs is planning *what resources* (abilities, materials, technology) *to use and planning how to use those resources*.

Collective planning does not entail central command economics. Rather, on the approach we have in mind (O'Neill & Hebenton, characterising Barbara Wootton's view[24]):

> A planned economy would need…a high degree of democratic vigilance from citizens, with a dispersal of power from the centre to each locality, and with what one might think of as a structure of subsidiarity to make sure that the instantiation of a general economic plan was always sensitive to local needs and local problems.

Caring solidarity is scalable, and enjoins solidary reasoning at lots of different scales, for instance participatory budgeting at local and municipal levels.[25] But this is not an anti-state approach; some centralised management is also desirable in any socialist mode of organisation in contexts broadly like ours.[26] Plausibly, constitutional commitments are themselves plan-based social structures that would be managed collaboratively.[27] Planning expands outwards socially and modally, giving greater stability and resourcefulness.

Many different agencies would have control over different aspects of production: the workers themselves, surrounding communities (attending to externalities including the cultural significance of productive practices), and, of course, consumers. The main point is that control over

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[23] Of course, there are many needs, some stable, some changing over time and with different contingencies. We can make plans that are as determinate and complex and flexible as we need to meet needs as best as we can in this dynamic environment.

[24] Gomberg 2021 also distinguishes between central command economics and centralised management of production, which latter is compatible with extensive subsidiarity.

[25] Cf. Hahnel and Albert 1991; cf. Erik Olin Wright's model of 'decentralised democratic governance' 2010.

[26] "Commons projects are projects of planning; regulation of carbon emissions (or other ecological pollutants); the distribution of a basic income (or of public health or education) programs, the establishment of networked infrastructures are extremely difficult of any large scale without the exercise of governmental power." Dyer-Witheford, 2009.

[27] Cf. Shapiro 2013.

production is not just a matter of individual producers having more authority to decide how to do their job. It is a matter of everyone in the economy having a say – in consumption, production, and collaborative capacities.[28]

A further advantage of transparent participation in this dense, scalable, multiple-centred approach concerns mutual recognition. People can *see themselves* and one another as actively contributing to actual and increasingly larger concerns – and ultimately, to sustaining a socialist society. This is another point of connection with socialist tradition, and also fits with the idea of socialism as a progressive struggle towards greater realisation of the ideal.

3.5 From collective planning the means of production to collective control of the means of production

So far, we have elaborated the link between caring solidarity and collective planning of the means of production. We now turn to the link between collective planning and collective *control* of those means.

Most actions have material enablers. You cannot swim without water, build without bricks, or play piano without a piano. This is also true, as we saw earlier, of care. Without the relevant equipment and support, doctors can only latently care for their patients. To care, they must have the relevant material enablers. To be empowered, we said, is to be intentionally provided with these enablers to care.

Now, planning to do something is possible only if the planner *controls* the relevant enablers. By control, we just mean whatever use of those enablers is required for them to enable the relevant activity. In the case of swimming, that means access to suitable water. In the case of building, that means access to and power to manipulate all the relevant building materials. In the case of the music-making, that means access to a piano.

To see why planning is only possible if one controls the relevant enablers, consider some contrasting examples. Suppose I am building you a house, but brick access is decided by a randomising device. Then I cannot plan to build tomorrow. At most, I can plan, conditionally, to build if I get bricks. Likewise, suppose you own the bricks, and I need to ask you for them tomorrow. I don't know that you will say yes, so again, at most I can plan conditionally to build, if you grant them to me. In these cases, my ability to formulate and execute a plan (to build you a house) is compromised by my lack of control of the material enablers (bricks). Hence, effectively

[28] There is a deep connection between socialism and a broadly Deweyan conception of democracy. See, e.g., Dewey 1951, Wright 2010.

planning to distribute means of production in accordance with productive need is possible only with control over the means of production.

It might be objected that, technically, I can *plan* to swim, build, or practice medicine without having access to water, bricks, or medical equipment, if I falsely believe I have such access. This is because planning is a psychological state, whereas control concerns one's *de facto* power (in this case over productive resources). However, in the case of false beliefs, my plans will come to nothing; they will be ineffective. To plan *effectively* I must not only believe that I can build tomorrow; I must have control over the bricks, and indeed all the needed materials I need, tomorrow. Thus, effective planning of the means of production is possible only if there is collective control of those means.[29]

Section Four: From Collective Control to Collective Ownership

Our first positive result is that socialism constitutively involves collective planning, and that collective planning, in turn, requires collective control of the means of production. The next stage is to argue from this to collective ownership of the means of production.

4.1. The Argument for Collective Ownership

Collective control is a socio-psychological/economic category. Property is a deontic category, concerning norms governing the use and transfer of resources. Ownership is a juridical deontic category, concerning legally protected property rights. (We will henceforth not mark any significant difference between property and ownership.[30])

Now, ownership structures facilitate or inhibit different socio-economic structures, in more or less successful ways. There is a wide variety of different kinds of ownership structures, varying in the claims, liberties, and powers that ownership confers over different kinds of resources in different contexts, with varying constraints.[31] We distinguish two classes of ownership structures: private ownership and collective ownership.[32]

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[29] For the sake of clarity, notice that there is an implicit step between planning and control here, concerning *management* of resources. Planning that involves resources involves planning what resources (abilities, materials, technology) to use and also planning how to use those resources. This latter is plausibly *managing* these resources. In order to manage those resources effectively, one needs to control those resources.

[30] For some differences, see Owens 2019.

[31] Hohfeld 1919. For a simple contrast concerning constraints, see the contrast between appropriation and zoning in Waldron 2004.

[32] It would be a mistake, however, to view these as dichotomous alternatives, such that societies must either be based on private or collective ownership. In fact, almost all societies are hybrids, with a mix of private and collective forms of property, varying in degree (see Wright 2010). Our argument is for collective ownership of the means of production,

Our strategy is to first argue, negatively, that private property is incompatible with collective control, before making the positive case that collective property would do so.

By *private* ownership, we have in mind a juridical deontic status that yields entitlements to use and transfer goods at an individual owner's discretion. As Jeremy Waldron puts the point (2004):

> In a private property system, property rules are organized around the idea that various contested resources are assigned to the decisional authority of particular individuals (or families or firms).
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> …In general, the right of a proprietor to decide as she pleases about the resource that she owns applies whether or not others are affected by her decision. If Jennifer owns a steel factory, it is *for her* to decide (in her own interest) whether to close it or to keep the plant operating, even though a decision to close may have the gravest impact on her employees and on the prosperity of the local community.

This is not to say that a system of private ownership makes one's discretion absolute. In a market-based economic system, one's choices will often be constrained in a variety of ways. Workers own their labour power, but they are effectively forced to sell that labour power to provide for themselves and their family. Similarly, capitalist firms' ability to act as they please is severely constrained by competition with other firms and the need to maximize profit. Jennifer can choose to close the factory or keep it open, but insofar as she wants to keep it open and thriving, the choices available to her will be necessarily restricted.

Full private ownership involves the following rights (Steiner, Otsuka, and Vallentyne, 2005):

> (1) control rights over the use of the object; (2) rights to compensation if someone uses the object without one's permission; (3) enforcement rights (to prevent the violation of these rights or to extract compensation owed for past violation); (4) rights to transfer these rights to others (by sale, rental, gift, or loan); and (5) immunity to the nonconsensual loss of any of the rights of ownership.

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understood as those resources we might use to empower needs-meeting. This allows for private ownership of those resources that we do not use to empower needs-meeting.

This raises the question of how *much* of social life needs to be organised this way for the society to count as socialist. Here we might distinguish a threshold view where to count as socialist a society has to attain a requisite level of collective ownership from a scalar view where socialism is understood as matter of degree (Hebenton and O'Neill 2024, 180-181). Caring solidarity requires that the means of production be collectively owned. This would surely meet the requisite level to count as socialism on a threshold view and would count as significantly socialist on a scalar view.

Why is private ownership incompatible with caring solidarity? Private ownership is designed to support discretionary control over resources, and to enable the accumulation of resources by way of the entitlement to 'generate income' from them. Besides the well-known point that production for profit doesn't do a good job of meeting everyone's needs,[33] the key point is that private ownership is inconsistent with the kind of robust collective control that is necessary for collective planning. To see why, suppose that Jenifer, the owner of the steel factory, delegates control of her steel factory to her workers, who run it on her behalf. It might be thought that Jenifer's workers then exercise collective control over the factory, thereby making collective planning possible. But this is not so. For while Jenifer owns the factory, that control can always be taken back. And given Jenifer has the discretion to do that at will, her workers' plans – about what to produce, how to produce, in what quantities, and by whom – will naturally be shaped by the constraint of not alienating her. Even if Jenifer does not exercise her right to take back control, her power to exercise that right is sufficient to limit the collective control her workers enjoy over their production. Put simply, control without ownership is weak tea.[34]

By contrast, we can define collective ownership as follows:

> (1) control rights over the use of the object to meet specific needs contextually and permissively defined; (2) no rights to compensation if someone uses the object without one's permission as a suitable way to participate in socialist production; (3) enforcement rights contextually defined (e.g. democratically enforced management of stolen empowerments); (4) no rights to transfer these rights to others (by sale, rental, gift, or loan); and (5) individual control over productive resources can be de-authorised if those resourced are sufficiently underutilised and scarce. Fertile agricultural land, complex scientific equipment, or individual work space can be reassigned if the current user isn't using it productively.

We have argued that living in caring solidarity would involve planning to build and sustain socialist activities on multiple levels. This will include building and sustaining deontic structures that would support and facilitate living up to the ideal. Hence it is not a coincidence, or merely a matter of empirical contingency, that a collective ownership model supports and facilitates collective management, planning, and control. Rather, collective ownership is the category of models of ownership that we would build and sustain precisely in order to support and facilitate

[33] Cf. the 'Captain Samuel Vimes 'Boots' theory of socio-economic unfairness in Terry Pratchett's *Men at Arms*.

[34] For this point at greater length, see Kuch 2010, Gonzalez Ricoy 2018; but see Frye 2023.

collective planning and control. In fact, to take this point one step further, not only is it the case that we design a model of ownership to enable and secure models of desirable control, but creating and sustaining collective ownership will be one part of collectively controlling production. Hence, it would be partly constitutive of caring solidarity that involves building and sustaining collective ownership of the means of production.[35]

It might be helpful to say something about the metaphysical status of this argument from collective control to collective ownership. The relationship between caring solidarity and collaborative planning and control is metaphysically constitutive: the definitions of the various constituents of caring solidarity entail that in caring solidarity there will be collaborative control of the means of production. There is no such metaphysical entailment from collective control to collective ownership, since the ideal of caring solidarity is a democratic ideal, one in which people collectively make decisions about a wide range of political, economic, and juridical matters. Rather, the argument is a normative one, that collaborators in caring solidarity *would* opt for whichever system of property rights would empower us to live in caring solidarity. This would be a system of property rights that reflected and supported the structures of control in a collaborative division of labour. For reasons given, private ownership would not be chosen by collaborators in caring solidarity Collective ownership, or, more specifically, a system of ownership rights that reflects our responsibilities in caring solidarity, would be.[36]

4.2 Summary of the Argument

This completes our ownership from caring solidarity to collective ownership. Here is the full argument, more schematically:

1. Socialism is caring solidarity: shared activity in which we identify as having a need to do what we can to meet one another's needs.
2. One of the needs of others we are meeting is their need to meet needs.
3. Meeting the need to meet needs constitutively involves being empowered to meet those needs.

Therefore, socialism as caring solidarity constitutively involves collective empowerment to meet needs.

[35] This argument draws on David Owens' influential proposal that structures of property rights "exist to serve" certain kinds of interests in control over resources (*op.cit.*). Our argument focusses on control interests not authority interests. However, we, separately, think that our interest in collective authority is enabled by collective ownership, as well as our interest in collective control.

[36] This argument for principles that would be accepted given standards of practical reasoning is familiar from Rawls's argument in the original position. For our argument to be more conclusive, we would similarly need to state our socio-psychological assumptions and background conditions in more detail. This is work for another time.

4. Collective empowerment to meet needs constitutively involves collective management which involves collective planning.
5. The resources employed in empowerment to meet needs are (analytically) the means of production.

Therefore, socialism as caring solidarity constitutively involves collective planning with the means of production.

6. Collective planning with the means of production is only possible with collective control of the means of production.

Therefore, socialism as caring solidarity entails collective control of the means of production.

7. Collective control of the means of production would involve collective ownership of the means of production.

Therefore, socialism as caring solidarity would involve collective ownership of the means of production.

We introduced premises 1 and 2 in §2, and made a case for 3, 4, 5, and 6 in §3. We made the case for 7, concerning the relationship between control to ownership, in §4.

Section Five: Two Objections and Replies

We now consider some objections to our position. We put aside objections to the idea of socialism as caring solidarity. While these objections are important, we have discussed them elsewhere and a full response would take us too far afield. Instead, we specifically address objections to our core argument that caring solidarity requires collective control and ownership of the means of production. We focus on two lines of thought: one that argues that we can achieve caring solidarity within a suitably regulated market, and another that objects that our ideal is unsuited to modern, large-scale production.

5.1 The Market Socialism Objection

In the previous section, we argued that there are conflicts between private ownership and the forms of collective control that partly constitute the ideal of caring solidarity. However, it might now be argued that this argument was too quick, and that caring solidarity can be realized in the context of a suitably regulated market system.

The objection runs as follows. Suppose we are committed to the idea of caring solidarity: we want to do what we can to meet the needs of others. Couldn't we elect to organise production via markets precisely on that basis? After all, markets are often thought to have significant advantages when it comes to the efficient organisation of meeting needs. Of course, markets have significant problems. But, the objection continues, we can mitigate these problems with robust background institutions, such a

highly redistributive tax system and worker-controlled firms. Thus, it is a mistake to see the market as opposed to caring solidarity. Rather, people could support the market out of the very interest in caring solidarity that we have emphasised.

This is a familiar line of thought, but we think it is limited in two main ways.

Firstly, given the very opacity of the invisible hand, huge swathes of 'choices' will be made by the market system *rather* than by the people affected by these 'choices.'[37] Here we must draw a distinction between two types of control. In the scenario envisioned in the objection, we have control over the *establishment* of this huge invisible hand system. But the only control that is exercised *within* it is the highly artificial context of specific choices about what and whether to exchange. And as we have already said, these choices are themselves often severely restricted. I own my own labour power, but I must sell it to support myself and my family. You own your firm, but market competition means you have to replace your workforce with robots. As producers, consumers, and third parties, the market gives us very little *mid-sized* control over the nature and quality of products, production processes, and associated externalities.[38] But most of production is mid-sized. Our modest conjecture is that as time goes on it would be increasingly difficult to see ourselves as collectively involved in relations of caring solidarity.

Secondly, and relatedly, it is *a priori* true that in efficient markets people need to be responsive to profit maximization. This will often conflict with the motive of care: the motivation to meet the need of others for its own sake. G.A Cohen's gives the example of how his father's career as a dress cutter came to an abrupt end when one day, despite having worked as a dress cutter for fifty-five years, he was told by his boss that there was no longer enough work to keep him on.[39] Cohen writes:

> '[T]he capitalist market does not, of course, require people to handle people roughly…[but] the market does require people to handle *people*, to manage them, in a particular sense…Morrie was dismissed because it no longer paid his boss to pay him.'

Note that this point does not rely on the contentious empirical claim – itself associated with Cohen – that market participants have antisocial attitudes, like greed and fear. As many have argued, market motivations will often be more complex than this. The point is specifically about efficient markets. To get the efficiency benefits that defenders of markets

[37] Cf. Cordelli 2025 refers to this as the "rule by none."
[38] Here we are partly inspired by the arguments against opacity in Hussain 2023.
[39] Famously discussed in Cohen 2001. See also Steiner 2014.

say they provide, people have to respond to the imperative to maximize profit. This will often require us to treat others in uncaring ways.[40]

At this point, consider a further objection to our position: 'If the market suggests that Morrie Cohen's job should be terminated, he's not actually contributing to the good of others! The marginal cost of keeping him employed is higher than the marginal benefit. It would be *un*caring to not accept that his work (in this specific capacity) is wasteful.'

But even in the best-case scenario, there is a decent chance in any particular instance of not serving someone, or firing them, or reducing their wages/hours/benefits, that doing so will not be for the best.[41] Even if it is, it seems unlikely the agent will know that it is. And even if they do, they won't know why - that's the opacity point, that is incompatible with the counterfactually robust notion of control we have in mind. At best, one would know the abstract fact that doing so is the best (most efficient) use of resources across some massive system.

Furthermore, asking someone to be directly motivated to accept a huge personal sacrifice – like losing one's job, which for many people (including Morrie Cohen) is more than a source of income – on the basis of this maximally abstract property is massively demanding. And this demandingness is all the more problematic given that, under market socialism, one is simultaneously enjoined to pursue one's self-interest, to get the alleged benefits of efficient markets. Indeed, the market-based system we're envisioning would involve a kind of moral schizophrenia. Even if I really care about employees, I must lay them off. Even if I really care about my customers, I must try and profit at their expense. Even if I really care about producers, I must try and get their service for the lowest possible cost. The market socialist response relies on an unstable amalgam of ruthless self-interest and altruistic self-sacrifice. In caring solidarity, by contrast, there is greater congruence between the content of our first-order and collective ends. I play my part in the larger activity of caring solidarity precisely *by* caring about you.

Finally, to repeat, we are not insisting on an open and shut case for collective ownership here. It is, to some extent, an open question how we are to organise ourselves when we know all the various values and constraints.[42] But even if it turns out that we can't do without markets, it would follow, on our view, that organising economic activity by way of markets would involve considerable loss of value. This represents a

[40] Maguire 2022.

[41] Though cf. Craig and Pencavel (1995) and Pencavel,J., Pistaferri, L., & Schivardi, F. 2006. "Wages, employment, and capital in capitalist and worker-owned firms." Industrial and Labour Relations Review, 60(1), 23.

[42] One of us is optimistic that the ideal of caring solidarity will explain all relevant values and constraints; the other is more pluralistic. The position of the paper is neutral between these two approaches.

contrast with egalitarian and other market socialist defenders, for whom the question of whether to organise with markets is of merely instrumental interest.

5.2 The Romantic Anti-Capitalism Objection

At this point it might be objected that we have proved too much. For our response to the market socialism objection might be thought to show that our view is simply incompatible with the realities of modern, large-scale production, which involves a complex global division of labour. Our view might be thought to be a version of what David Miller calls 'romantic anti-capitalism'. The question is whether our emphasis on care and solidarity is feasible only for the 'medieval village' and not for our contemporary global economy.

We think this objection is mistaken. Here we make three points.

First, the ideal of caring solidarity can be realised at any scale. The ideal does emphasize the importance of *actual* collaboration and actual recognition of service and commitment to the ideal. This does provide some support for organising production in ways that enhance genuine recognition in production: for localisation, subsidiarity, community wealth building, and so on. This seems to us to be a feature not a bug. However, in keeping with the ideal of an encompassing solidarity, communities with devolved authority shouldn't be isolated from one another, but should collaborate with one another in turn. That is the first point.[43]

Second, there will, of course, be economies of scale that - by collaborative reasoning together in the light of the ideal of caring solidarity - we might choose to benefit from. Larger collaborations will require to be managed as such, which will likely involve roles with larger scope. We see no tension here with the ideal. We are not opposed to hierarchies, with some roles having larger scope and occupants subject to more stringent normative expectations.

Thirdly, we would follow the tradition in socialist thought that emphasizes the success of large-scale socialised productive projects. Here we have in mind not only familiar examples such as Wikipedia and Mondragón, and the relative efficiency of public as opposed to private forms of health-care provision – but also and perhaps more significantly, the extensive knowledge production generated in the sciences and other academic disciplines. It is clearly part of the self-conception of many

[43] Zuehl and Lovett 2022 make a version of this point. See also the discussion of 'empowered participatory governance in Erik Olin Wright, *op.cit*.

university researchers that they are playing their part in a large-scale, coordinated effort to meet human needs collaboratively.

Of course, there might also seem to be a danger that working in larger collaborations might make it more difficult to see ourselves in our work. For some industries, there might be a trade-off between smaller-scale work that allows for greater recognition and larger-scale organisation that allows for greater efficiency. But as we said earlier, we think this is instead a strength of the caring solidarity approach. For collaborations will be nested in ways that aim to preserve transparency, and hence facilitate participants seeing themselves as parts of a larger whole.[44]

Section Six: Conclusion

In conclusion, let us return to ownership fundamentalism and ownership instrumentalism. Unlike ownership fundamentalism, we are not arguing that collective ownership and control is a value in itself. In our view, collective ownership and control is valuable only insofar as it has a specific end, namely doing what we can to meet one another's needs together, or, in short, living together in caring solidarity.

This enables us to avoid an objection to ownership fundamentalism by G.A. Cohen. Cohen argues that while socialists have historically seen 'the market's generation of massive unplanned outcomes' as 'deplorable as such…because they are unplanned', this view entirely misplaced' (G.A. Cohen, 1995, 260):

> Individual self-direction, a person's determining the course of his own life, may have value *per se*, but collective self-direction does not.

To buttress this point, Cohen distinguishes between collective control and democracy, arguing that democratic decisions have value in themselves, but that merely collective control does not. However, this objection does not apply to our view. For, unlike the ownership fundamentalists, we are not arguing that collective control and ownership of the means of production is valuable *by itself*. There is no value in controlling the means of production in some horrible way, for instance. We are rather arguing that collective control is one necessary part of a richer substantive ideal, viz., the ideal of living in caring solidarity. Consequently, we can agree with Cohen that "I would not say about bad things caused by planning: well at least they were planned" (Cohen 1995, 261). But we can say about *some* bad things caused by planning, 'well, at least we manifested solidarity with one another; shame things didn't work out as we'd hoped. Oh well. Onwards!'

[44] For extended discussion of this point, see Maguire 2025.

At the same time, our rejection of ownership fundamentalism does not lead us toward ownership instrumentalism, as it did for Cohen. For, on our view, unlike that of the ownership instrumentalists, the relationship between socialism, collective planning and collective control is not one of empirical contingency or a matter for further economic investigation. It is partly constitutive of the socialist relationship that it involves effective planning with the means of production. Effective planning, we have argued, is possible only with collective control and ownership of the means of production. Thus, we hope to have vindicated the traditional socialist commitment to collective control and ownership without fetishising property relations.[45]

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[45] Thanks to [many people].

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