

Socialism: What's Left after the Collapse of the Soviet System?*

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ASKED TO DEFINE my intellectual or political orientations, I generally respond that my analytic work builds on Marxian foundations and that I work politically as a socialist democrat. To many, it would appear that the collapse of the Soviet system in the late 1980s must have dissolved much, if not most, of the substantive and methodological footing of my intellectual superstructure.

Should I feel like an intellectual orphan, an activist cast adrift? I do not. I continue to work as a socialist democrat. I believe that my quest for a "socialist" economy in the United States has a coherent objective. At the same time, many important issues remain in the conceptualization of socialism. I focus here on the notion of socialism and ask both what is left conceptually after the collapse of the Soviet system and what principal foundational issues remain in the theoretical elaboration and political pursuit of a socialist future.

Into the Dustbin?

Alec Nove published a new edition of his important book, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism*, in 1991, well after the death knell had tolled east of the Elbe. He aptly described the surge of skepticism confronting those who would continue to discuss his subject:

Much has changed since 1980, when the original version of this book was started. . . . 'Socialism' in its Soviet and East European version is in an advanced state of disintegration, written off as a failure not only by the bulk of Western observers but also by the bulk of their own 'eastern' citizens. For some on both sides of what was once an iron curtain, this means the end of socialism as such. 'Capitalism' has won. Socialism must now be relegated to the dustbin of history, albeit an interesting and intellectually stimulating dustbin. The world henceforth belongs to the followers of Hayek, Friedman, Reagan and Mrs. Thatcher. No new edition of this book is needed. Into the dustbin with it, and its author, too, for good measure!¹

My esteemed colleague Robert L. Heilbroner has himself expressed similar skepticism:

Less than seventy-five years after it officially began, the contest between capitalism and socialism is over: capitalism has won. . . . [T]he great question now seems how rapid will be the transformation of socialism into capitalism, and not the other way around, as things looked only a half century ago. . . . The collapse of centralized planning shows that at this moment socialism has no plausible economic framework.²

With Nove, I respond, "Well, not so, or not quite so."³ In this brief note I would like to advance a fairly simple argument about post-Soviet socialism: though it is fair to conclude that socialism, conceived as a theory of political economic organization and transformation, has been seriously wounded by recent events, the wounds are not terminal. Indeed, the patient, if properly nursed back to health, may be stronger and more conceptually appealing than ever.

In the spirit of this special issue of *Social Research*, my argument will be brief, informal, and suggestive, relying where necessary on references to more complete treatments. I hope

¹ Alec Nove, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism Revisited*, 2d ed. (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1991), p. xi.

² Robert L. Heilbroner, "The Triumph of Capitalism," *New Yorker*, Jan. 23, 1989, pp. 98, 109.

³ Nove, *Economics of Feasible Socialism Revisited*, p. 1.

to capture the spirit of a constructive appreciation of socialism rather than to undertake either a systematic theoretical outline or a practical blueprint for its "feasible" implementation.

But first a cautionary note: there are many issues which I will ignore. For example, I will not engage questions about the actual historical causes of the collapse of the Soviet system or the sources of its leaders' initial leap toward a "free market" system of economic organization since I have virtually no expertise on those questions. Nor will I focus centrally on the problem of the political likelihood of movement toward "socialism" in advanced capitalist societies such as the United States; those are troubling and complicated problems, but I see little sense in exploring them unless and until we can gain some greater clarity about the objectives whose likelihood of achievement we might want to assess.

One, Two, Many Socialisms?

Michael Harrington wrote just before his death, "People speak of socialism. We should speak of socialisms."⁴ There have been, historically, many approaches to the theoretical definition of socialism. I shall ask here whether there is a meaningful, generic conception of socialism which encompasses but cannot be reduced to the Soviet version, and whether, if so, we can imagine a version of socialism which would potentially avoid many of the glaring faults and failures of the Soviet model. I shall concentrate primarily on the economic dimensions of socialism, though I shall subsequently consider the interconnections between these economic dimensions and the political and cultural aspects of socialism.

Nove has written, "a society may be seen to be a socialist one if the major part of the means of production of goods and

⁴ Michael Harrington, *Socialism Past and Future* (New York: Plume Books, 1990), p. 28.

services are not in private hands, but are in some sense socially owned and operated, by state, socialized or cooperative enterprises."⁵ This simple definition—which will itself require significant elaboration—at least provides a point of departure, indicating what needs more completely to be conceptualized or elaborated.

Working with such a simple definition, we can surely see that the Soviet model could be considered by many to be a version of socialism. In this vein, Harrington observes, "in Soviet practice . . . , *the state owned the means of production, which made some people think it must be socialist. . . .*"⁶

Referring still to Nove's elementary definition of socialism, we could then imagine three logically distinct kinds of explanations for the failures and eventual collapse of the Soviet model.⁷ First, it could be argued that the Soviet model failed not because of the intrinsic limitations of socialism or even of the centrally planned system of state ownership but rather because of the superimposition of a totalitarian politics on a viable economic model. Second, one could aver, as many have, that the centrally planned Soviet style of socialism failed because of the limitations of that economic mode of organization, but that other kinds of socialist economic organization might work much more effectively and perhaps

⁵ Alec Nove, "Socialism," in John Eatwell et al., eds., *New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics*, vol. 4 (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 398.

⁶ Harrington, *Socialism Past and Future*, p. 79; italics in original. Harrington was himself disinclined to consider the Soviet system as "socialist" in any theoretically meaningful sense. The existing communist states, he wrote before their collapse, "are collectivist, but not socialist. The means of production are indeed nationalized, but the people have no control over the economy they theoretically own" (*ibid.*, p. 61).

⁷ In accenting the failures of the Soviet system, I do not mean to denigrate its notable historical accomplishments in developing and modernizing the economies of the former Soviet Union. On many of the positive accomplishments, see, for example, Harry G. Shaffer, ed., *The Soviet System in Theory and Practice: Western and Soviet Views*, 2d ed. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1984). For an interesting reflection precisely on this question of "failure" in light of the recent collapse of the Soviet system, see also Göran Therborn, "The Life and Times of Socialism," *New Left Review*, no. 194 (July/August 1992): 17–32.

even transcend some of the limitations of capitalism. Or, third and obviously, one could interpret the failures of the Soviet system as manifesting the intrinsic limitations of socialism itself, recognizing the argument, in Heilbroner's words, that ". . . socialism has no plausible economic framework."

In order to address these logical possibilities, however, it would appear that we need a more elaborated definition of the economic dimensions of socialism. Are there in fact ways in which a "major part of the means of production . . . are not in private hands, but are in some sense socially owned and operated . . ." which do not reduce, in the end, to something like the lapsed Soviet model? Many who argue the virtues of market socialism would obviously reply that there are such conceptions, but does market socialism (or suitable variants) provide a "plausible economic framework"?

In order to elaborate a more useful conception of the economic dimensions of socialism, it would appear that such a conception should involve two principal elements. First, we should clarify what *objectives* a socialist system should seek to accomplish. Second, we should consolidate a generic or encompassing definition of the principal *organizational characteristics* of socialism which could potentially serve to define the boundaries which distinguish a socialist mode of pursuing those objectives from some other mode—say, of "capitalism with a human face."

Socialism has always been presented as an alternative to capitalism. In that context, socialists have historically advocated pursuit of some combination of six objectives in order to transcend the oppressions and excrescences of capitalism. I shall refer throughout to these as the *objectives of socialism*.⁸

⁸ In highlighting and stipulating these objectives, I echo Thomas E. Weisskopf, "Toward a Socialism for the Future, in the Wake of the Demise of the Socialism of the Past," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 24 (Fall/Winter 1992): 1–28; and "A Democratic-Enterprise-Based Market Socialism," in Pranab Bardhan and John Roemer, eds., *Market Socialism: The Current Debate*, forthcoming. The only difference in our lists is my addition of the objectives of *individual security* and *individual*

- *individual security*—the right of individuals securely to enjoy the reproduction of their basic conditions of existence;
- *individual self-realization*—individuals' opportunity continually to develop their human capacities for self-expression and social contribution;
- *social equality*—relatively equal distribution of opportunities and welfare both for its own sake and as a means of contributing to realization of other objectives;
- *political and economic democracy*—including the extension of majority control over the full range of political and economic decisions affecting people's lives, protection of the rights of individuals and minorities, and enhanced involvement and participation in public life;
- *solidaristic community*—the enhancement of feelings of social reciprocity and mutual obligation among members of local and national communities; and
- *economic rationality*—maximum possible reduction of waste in the allocation and utilization of the social stock of natural, capital, and human resources.

How are these objectives of socialism achieved? In order to focus primarily—at least for the moment—on the economic dimensions of socialism, let us concentrate on how societies might organize themselves to achieve the following (largely) economic functions: (a) the allocation of productive resources, (b) the system of production of use values, (c) the composition of the bundle of intermediate and final outputs of production, (d) the circulation and distribution of those outputs, and (e) the broader dynamic processes effecting growth and development of a society's economic life.⁹

self-realization. Another mostly overlapping list of socialist objectives is provided by David Miller, "A Vision of Market Socialism," *Dissent* 38 (Summer 1991): 406.

⁹ I focus so steadfastly on these economic dimensions here in order to make clear that I do not intend in this paper to deal as a central concern with many other dimensions of socialist organization, such as the modes of political self-organization or the development of human culture. At a seminar presentation of the kernel of this paper, I was criticized for not making sufficiently clear the *limited* and not fully

Given that focus on primarily economic functions, let us then conceptualize the *organizational characteristics* of socialism as a system of socioeconomic organization which pursues the objectives of socialism by (a) seeking as much as possible to implement democratic determination of both the allocation of economic resources and the rewards to economic agency through some form of *social property rights* in the means of production; while at the same time (b) aiming as much as possible to provide consumers and citizens determining influence over the objects of the allocation of resources and the directions of economic development through some form of *community entitlements*.

I have purposely constructed this schematization of socialist objectives and organizational characteristics in the most general and abstract terms precisely in order to encompass a wide variety of alternative possible (or "really existing") forms of socialist organization and thus to highlight Harrington's admonition that "we should speak of socialisms" in the plural. It should be fairly obvious that these definitions allow for a significant diversity of socialist systems within their general boundaries and requirements.

For example, if one so wished, the former Soviet model could be characterized as a system which implemented this general conception by (a) stressing the objective of (its view of) *economic rationality* (and sidetracking the objective of *political economic democracy*) while (b) seeking to integrate synthetically the effectivity and imperatives of *social property rights* and *community entitlements* through the unifying mechanism of *state control* of the most important economic decisions by (c) implementing a system of *centralized economic planning* under unified state control.

Similarly, a relatively pure system of "self-managed market socialism" could be viewed as an institutional arrangement which sought to fulfill its economic functions by (a) pursuing

encompassing sense in which I was discussing the theoretical conceptualization of socialist society.

economic rationality while simultaneously placing relatively high priority on some domains of *political economic democracy* through (b) emphasizing the paramount importance of enterprise *social property rights* through worker self-management (and consequently downplaying the relative importance of *community entitlements*) and (c) relying primarily on *relatively competitive market mechanisms* for achieving the allocation of resource supply and the mobilization of product demand to worker self-managed enterprises.

Working in these directions, in short, it is my own view that a meaningful, generic conception of socialism exists which encompasses but cannot be reduced to the Soviet version. We must next ask, obviously, whether there are other alternative, theoretically plausible models of socialism beyond the Soviet model which implement this more general view of socialism and which could be viewed, on relevant *a priori* grounds, as preferable either to the Soviet model and/or potentially to capitalism itself.

Three Contenders

The Soviet model has been sharply criticized, among many failings, as inefficient and undemocratic. In the rapidly developing recent literature, three alternative models of socialism—all of which fit within the generic definition advanced in the previous section—have emerged as leading candidates for theoretical consideration. For each has been argued its relative advantages, among many virtues, on efficiency and democracy grounds.¹⁰ Two of these alternatives

¹⁰ I rely heavily here on three recent collections which usefully represent these alternative models: "Socialism: Alternative Visions and Models," a special issue of *Science & Society* 56 (Spring 1992); "The Future of Socialism," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 24 (Fall/Winter 1992); and Bardhan and Roemer, *Market Socialism*. Interested readers can consult any of these collections for elaboration of each of these

fit generally under the rubric of "market socialism" while the third represents the "participatory planning" approach.

Market socialist models in general propose to rely on relatively competitive markets for the exchange of commodities in order to coordinate and provide information about the activities of millions of individual agents in a complex economy. The models embody market *socialism* rather than market *capitalism* if and when they institutionalize some kind of equalized rights to control and income among the members of some identifiable body of individuals. Here, the recent literature distinguishes between two principal alternative loci for such equalized rights, the "enterprise" and the "community." Thomas E. Weisskopf usefully distinguishes the two alternative models in this regard, identifying respectively:

(a) *public market socialism*, in which politically constituted citizen communities hold both control and income rights in enterprises; enterprises are run by managers accountable to government agencies (at the local, regional or national level), which in turn are accountable to their citizen constituents; and the net operating surplus of the enterprise belongs to the whole citizen constituency and is allocated according to its collective desire;

(b) *self-managed market socialism*, in which the workers of an enterprise hold both control and income rights; enterprises are run by managers accountable to their workers (directly or through workers' councils); and the net revenue generated by the enterprise (after payment for inputs other than labor) belongs to the whole work force and is allocated according to its collective desire.¹¹

Both models share reliance on the market for coordination and information. In contrast, the participatory planning model relies on nonmarket political mechanisms designed to allocate resources through iterative negotiations among councils representing various groups of workers, consumers, commu-

models, debate about their respective advantages and disadvantages, and further detailed references.

¹¹ Weisskopf, "Democratic-Enterprise-Based Market Socialism."; emphasis in the original.

nity residents, and broader groups of citizens. Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel briefly characterize the kind of process involved:

The participants in the planning procedure are the workers' councils and federations, the consumers' councils and federations and an Iteration Facilitation Board (IFB). Conceptually, the planning procedure is quite simple. The IFB announces 'indicative prices' for all goods, resources, categories of labor and capital stocks. Consumer councils and federations respond with consumption proposals taking the indicative prices of final goods and services as estimates of the social cost of providing them. Workers councils and federations respond with production proposals listing the outputs they would make available and the inputs they would need to make them, again, taking the indicative prices as estimates of the social benefits of outputs and true opportunity costs of inputs. The IFB then calculates the excess demand or supply for each good and adjusts the indicative price for the good up, or down, in light of the excess demand or supply. Using the new indicative prices consumer and worker councils and federations revise and resubmit their proposals.¹²

Iteratively, it is argued, this approach would converge to a feasible and optimal plan which would generate "efficiency" prices for all production inputs. Proponents of this model have argued in great and often rigorous detail that such an approach would not only promote considerable democracy and participation but that it would also achieve at least as rational and efficient an allocation of resources as would reliance on the market.¹³

Each of these three models is clearly "socialist" and not merely capitalist with a human face. Referring back to the

¹² Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, "Socialism as It Was Always Meant to Be," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 24 (Fall/Winter 1992): 53.

¹³ In the recent literature, the most rigorous elaboration of both the characteristics and efficiency advantages of a participatory planning approach is provided in Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel, *The Political Economy of Participatory Economics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). See also Pat Devine, *Democracy and Economic Planning* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988).

generic conceptualization of the organizational characteristics of economic socialism, each involves some considerable measure of equally distributed *social property rights* and/or *community entitlements*.

And strong cases have been made by the advocates of each of these models that they would effectively advance at least several of the objectives of socialism. Proponents of all three argue (persuasively in my view) that the respective models would achieve much greater *economic rationality* in the allocation of resources than achieved under the Soviet model of socialism—at the least because all three, whether involving market mechanisms or participatory planning, would better mobilize and record the preferences of individual agents than do central planning mechanisms. All would be likely to promote greater *social equality* than under the Soviet model—because of their relatively strict insistence on equal sharing within the relevant communities in the control and income rights vested in those communities.¹⁴ In quite different ways, all actively promote *political economic democracy*—with self-managed market socialism concentrating on economic democracy within the workplace, public market socialism emphasizing democratic practices in public communities of citizens, and participatory planning emphasizing democracy in both spheres as well as the means for reconciling different preferences and practices across spheres. Similarly, again in quite different ways, each model would presumably foster a greater degree of *solidaristic community* than one might expect under the Soviet model—since each involves the imperative, manifested in different domains, of reconciling individual rights, on the one hand, with majority preferences and egalitarian constraints, on the other, through democratic mechanisms. (But more on this issue below.) The three models are perhaps least well articulated about the objectives of *individual security* and

¹⁴ Critics of self-managed market socialism have worried about the potential inequality arising among self-managed enterprises.

individual self-realization, since the literature has tended to concentrate so centrally on the problems of efficiency and democracy that it has somewhat slighted the interdependent problems of individual entitlements to a minimum level of material well-being and continuing individual development of capacities for self-expression and social contribution.

I would hardly want to suggest that the task of conceptualization has been completed and that we need simply to choose among three complete, polished, fully elaborated models. Many theoretical issues require considerable further discussion.¹⁵ And the relationships among the three models need further clarification.¹⁶ But at least it seems possible to argue that these alternative models of economic socialism provide "a plausible economic framework."

Perhaps plausible, but preferable? Can it be clearly and reasonably argued that any or all of these three alternative models might better achieve the objectives of socialism than not only the vestigial Soviet model but also various variants of capitalist economic organization?

Here, too, the issues are complex. But it would appear from much of the recent literature on these issues that we have learned at least three important lessons about life under capitalism which help suggest the potential appeal of any of these models of economic socialism.¹⁷

First, social scientists of many persuasions have become increasingly attentive to the potentially contradictory relationship between political democracy and economic capitalism. It may be not only that capitalist development is more corrosive of effective substantive political democracy than the previous

¹⁵ Again, see the three collections cited above (in n. 10) for many interesting examples of this debate in progress.

¹⁶ Weisskopf argues, for example, for a synthetic market socialist model which combines central elements of the *self-managed* and *public* variants. (See "Democratic-Enterprise-Based Market Socialism.")

¹⁷ Again, on many of these issues of comparison between these socialist models and capitalist economies, see the collections of essays cited above in n. 10.

generation of analysts had expected,¹⁸ but, far more strongly, that economic democracy is a necessary condition for the realization and reproduction of some of the most important dimensions of political democracy.¹⁹ Any of the models of economic socialism outlined briefly above might better support political democracy than does capitalism (in its many variants) because democratic principles would be embedded and encouraged in a wider range of social spheres.

Second, both mainstream and heterodox economists have become increasingly aware of some of the incentive problems posed by the narrow ownership base embodied in capitalism.²⁰ If productivity depends on worker energy and intensity, and if that in turn depends on workplace incentives, then the formalization of worker participation and control through some system of democratically shared social property rights may more stably and effectively enhance worker productivity than the partial or compromised systems conceivable and currently being developed under capitalism.²¹

¹⁸ This is one of the conclusions, for example, toward which Charles E. Lindblom points in his classic *Politics and Markets: The World's Political-Economic Systems* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

¹⁹ On this complicated set of interactions, see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Democracy & Capitalism: Property, Community, and the Contradictions of Modern Social Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

²⁰ For a useful introduction to many of these issues, see Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, "Contested Exchange: New Microfoundations for the Political Economy of Capitalism," *Politics & Society* 18 (June 1990): 165–222; or Bowles and Gintis, "The Revenge of *Homo Economicus*: Contested Exchange and the Revival of Political Economy," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 7 (Winter 1993): 83–102.

²¹ Productivity depends not only on work intensity but also on capital intensity. A reasonable argument can be made that worker-controlled enterprises might invest less than capitalist enterprises, all else equal, and that in this respect "self-managed market socialism" might not unequivocally enjoy productivity advantages over capitalist enterprises. In this case, however, it would appear that the solution would be not to abandon the pursuit of viable and attractive socialist modes of organization but rather to address the sources of underinvestment themselves by promoting some form of democratically vested social property rights in enterprise decisions. On these issues, for example, see Weisskopf, "Democratic-Enterprise-Based Market Socialism"; and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, "The Democratic Firm: An Agency-Theoretic Evaluation," in Samuel Bowles et al., eds., *Democracy and Markets: Participation,*

Third, much depends on the trajectories along which technology develops. If technical change moves in the direction of requiring ever larger enterprises in order to sustain the scale necessary to foster and afford the most productive technologies, then this could pose increasingly difficult barriers to the realization and reproduction of decentralized economic democracy. But if, as seems at least as likely, many technologies point toward the increasing efficiency of relatively small and decentralized enterprise units, then many of the other advantages of economic democracy become increasingly salient.²²

Politics, Culture, and Economics

The preceding discussion has been conducted in a vacuum—as if it were fruitful to discuss conceptualizations of the economic dimensions of socialism without also considering either the web of political and cultural relationships knitting together a broader, integrated socialist society or the problems and possibilities of achieving such ambitious social transformations. Let me close this brief essay with a few equally brief comments on the relevance and implications of the connections among politics, culture, and economics for a discussion of “what’s left?”

First, and obviously, all three of the alternative models of socialism highlighted here depend centrally on the existence and reproduction of a strong political democracy.²³ It is virtually inconceivable that the various combinations of *social*

Accountability, and Efficiency (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 13–39.

²² This was a point which Keynes presciently stressed in his arguments for increasing economic independence; see John Maynard Keynes, “National Self-Sufficiency,” *Yale Review* 22 (June 1933): 755–769.

²³ I use the term “strong” democracy here at least partly in the sense of Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

property rights and *community entitlements* envisioned in the three models would be permitted, sustained, or supported in conditions of undemocratic political rule.

And yet, of course, there are many dimensions to and variations on political democracy. One important issue which needs much more carefully to be explored in the recent literature on socialism, I think, involves these alternative models' implications for and requirements of the broader system of political democracy within which they would be lodged. For example, how would potential conflicts between citizen preferences manifested through the state and worker preferences advanced through the enterprise be resolved? What implications, if any, do these models have for formal constitutional specification of citizen rights and responsibilities? How, in the case of each of the models, would the state contribute to the enhancement and protection of individual security and self-realization?

Second, and nearly as obviously, arguments for all of these models rely heavily on presuppositions of the existence of a rich "socialist" culture—of the hegemony, in Gramsci's sense, of a normative and practical social commitment to the values, among others, of equality and solidarity. If the broader society does not provide for the production of these cultural values, then it is not obvious that any of these models could easily protect itself against skepticism about and resistance to the egalitarian and solidaristic practices upon which they respectively depend.

This then obviously raises questions about *noneconomic* sources for the creation and cultivation of "socialist" culture. If we could conceptualize a society which *already* featured deep and widespread commitment to equality and solidarity, then we could easily imagine that any of these three models of economic socialism would contribute to the reproduction of those values. But if we cannot begin with that premise, as we clearly cannot in many currently existing societies, whence would such values emerge?

This difficult issue then points to a final and directly connected question about politics, culture, and economics. Let us assume that we live in a society dominated by both capitalist economic structures and highly individualistic cultural values. Even though we might accept that alternative models of economic socialism constitute a "plausible" structural alternative to economic capitalism, can we imagine the kind of surge of egalitarian and solidaristic cultural values which would be necessary to push for fundamental structural change?

These are hardly easy questions, and I do not propose to "answer" them here. Let me rather conclude with a few comments on what seem to me to be some of the most important considerations raised by these questions.

A first concern involves the plausibility *in the abstract* of individuals' commitment to interpersonal objectives such as equality and community. Are we as humans so ineluctably self-interested and egocentric that it strains credulity to imagine emergence of a "socialist culture"?

Much recent social science has built upon models, largely inspired by neoclassical economics, of rational self-interested individual agents—replete with refined discussion of the costs of collective action and the inevitability of free riding. But the pervasiveness of this methodological approach, of course, is not sufficient to establish the implausibility of human motivation which is not narrowly self-interested. First, some of the methodological and epistemological presuppositions of the rational-agent approach are themselves a bit wobbly.²⁴ Second, public opinion data typically find substantial public concern about the extent of inequality in many advanced capitalist societies—although the patterns and contradictions within

²⁴ See, for useful summary of some of this critique, Amartya Sen, "Rational Fools: A Critique of the Behavioral Foundations of Economic Theory," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (Summer 1977): 317–344; and Jon Elster, "Social Norms and Economic Theory," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 3 (Fall 1989): 99–117.

such public opinions are not at all simple.²⁵ Third, at a much more personal level, I have often been moved throughout my experience as a political activist by the depth and urgency of people's sense of solidarity and community—in the struggle for voting and civil rights in the South, in union organizing drives, in workers' self-education about health-and-safety hazards on the job. For all these reasons and more, I am persuaded that a rich social commitment to values like equality and community is in theory plausible. I am thus inclined in principle to agree with David Miller that socialism (in at least some of its forms of organization) "speaks to people's real aspirations, and it does not make incompatible demands on them."²⁶

But plausibility hardly guarantees strong probabilities. A second concern obviously involves the issue of tendencies and likelihoods. Given that in many advanced capitalist societies such as the United States socialist culture could hardly be described as hegemonic, what are the probabilities that strong and manifestly motivating concerns for equality and solidarity could come to condition political mobilization? One can imagine scores of possible developments potentially amplifying or muting such concerns. I shall focus here on only a few which, all else equal, seem favorable toward the development of socialist culture.

Socialists have long anticipated that transformations in the workplace would constitute a primary—and perhaps the most important—source of solidarity in capitalist societies as workers become more and more aware of the bonds within the capitalist workplace which create common conditions of harassment, deprivation, and exploitation. Many theorists of

²⁵ See, for one useful review for the United States, Jennifer L. Hochschild, *What's Fair? American Beliefs about Distributive Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

²⁶ David Miller, *Market, State, and Community: Theoretical Foundations of Market Socialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 336.

postindustrial society, by contrast, have insisted that these expectations were becoming less and less plausible as workplace relations become mediated more and more by individual human capital and informational skills.

A reasonable case can be made, I think, that the postindustrial elegy for workplace solidarity was somewhat premature. Let us accept for the purposes of discussion that the structure of workplace relations has profound implications for workers' sense of commonality.²⁷ Let us further suppose that the system of "mass production" in many advanced capitalist economies is waning as a dominant technological and social form.²⁸ If so, it would appear that many emergent forms of work organization are likely to reinforce (rather than vitiate) workers' sense of mutual dependence. To the extent that modern technologies both require and foster teamwork, quality controls, and "flexible specialization," it seems plausible to expect that they will deepen workers' feelings of commitment to each other and solidarity with the work group in which they're situated.

If work team solidarities are amplified, of course, they may eventually undermine social solidarities rather than strengthen them—since it may be that one work team may be induced by market competition to beggar its neighbor. But that possibility then raises in turn the potential implications of emergent forms of competition within the market in capitalist economies. Let us accept for the moment that the advanced capitalist economies are becoming more and more "globalized"—more and more dependent upon and involved in the global capitalist

²⁷ This argument is developed in some detail at the theoretical level in David M. Gordon, "The Best Defense Is a Good Defense: Toward a Marxian Theory of Labor Union Structure and Behavior," in M. Carter and W. Leahy, eds., *New Directions in Labor Economics and Industrial Relations* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame University Press, 1981), pp. 167–214.

²⁸ This argument is forcefully advanced by Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

economy.²⁹ What implications will that have for the probability of workers' and citizens' concern for community and solidarity?

On the one hand, there is a strong possibility that increasing globalization may enhance people's sense of belonging to a common national community. If workers' and consumers' well-being becomes increasingly dependent upon a nation's position within the global economy, then people seem likely to become more and more aware of their common relationship to that nation, of their mutual stakes in common objectives and solidaristic behavior. Unless one believes in the relatively extreme position that the spread of global capitalism eviscerates the power of the nation-state altogether, which I do not,³⁰ then this seems to suggest that individual work teams and communities will develop a heightened rather than diminished sense of commonality within national boundaries.

Such an anticipation poses many perils, of course, as many of us (on the left, at least) have grown accustomed to suspecting "nationalism" as an ideological force. But nationalism may be distinguished from what Miller calls "nationality," a sense of commonality, allegiance, and loyalty to a national history and unity. Nationalisms may "lead to repugnant conclusions," Miller argues, "but their connection with nationality as such is no stronger than, say, the connection between football violence and loyalty to one's chosen team. All particularist loyalties create at least the *potential* for objectionable behaviour towards outsiders, but to conclude that we should never pledge ourselves to anything less than humanity as a whole is to overlook everything that is valuable in these special commitments."³¹

²⁹ This development is itself complex and sometimes misapprehended. For a critical review of prevailing impressions of globalization, see David M. Gordon, "The Global Economy: New Edifice or Crumbling Foundations?" *New Left Review*, no. 168 (March/April 1988): 24-64.

³⁰ See the arguments in *ibid.*

³¹ Miller, *Market, State, and Community*, p. 241; emphasis in the original.

If we can imagine, then, that important trends in the organization of work and the global economy may potentially enhance people's sense of involvement in a mutual project, and thus that a culture placing increasing priority on mutuality, reciprocity, and solidarity might well emerge, will people be inclined to invest the energy and commitment in the political realization of these possibilities? It is commonly noted that creation and reproduction of a socialist culture takes time—and that people may view the costs of meetings as much higher than the benefits of solidarity. Here too, however, some important trends may increase the likelihood that people will be willing to commit themselves to such politics. First, the urgency of global ecological problems seems likely to imbue political participation with a mounting urgency of its own.³² Second, rising educational levels are associated, at least historically, with greater interest and involvement in politics, and there is little reason to expect that these historic trends will be dramatically attenuated. Third, it may well be that the long-term trend toward reduced working hours in most advanced capitalist economies will begin to free up some of the time necessary for greater civic participation in a common culture.³³ With such enhanced leisure time, David Miller suggests, "we may then be able to reverse Oscar Wilde's famous jibe that socialism takes up too many evenings by remarking that capitalism will shortly leave us with too many free afternoons."³⁴

All of this involves only possibilities, not certainties. And I see little point in this kind of essay in setting the odds for or

³² An interesting and dramatic recent example involves the growth of ecological activism among, of all people, California surfers. See David Wild, "Surfing's Eco Warriors," *Rolling Stone*, no. 659 (June 25, 1993): 70–76.

³³ The fact that this historic trend has recently been reversed in the United States does not mean that it has been reversed elsewhere or that its reversal in the United States is itself irreversible. On the U.S. case, see Juliet B. Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

³⁴ Miller, *Market, State, and Community*, p. 331.

against socialist culture. ("Jimmy the Greek now lists the odds against emergence of socialist culture at 150 to 1. . . .") I want to close by raising one final additional concern, the concern of language itself.

It may well be, as I have suggested in the preceding discussion, that a politics and culture supportive of socialist economic organization could develop. But there is always the danger, as recent developments in the Balkans so painfully dramatize, that mounting solidarity is accompanied by mounting aggressiveness toward "others." Michael Ignatieff evokes this constant danger:

That tragic history of need . . . has finally made us one: every part of the planet is now subject to the spiralling dialectic of need and human labour, and every part of the planet is under the same threat of extinction. Yet . . . the more evident our common needs as a species become, the more brutal becomes the human insistence on the claims of difference. The centripetal forces of need, labour and science which are pulling us together as a species are counterbalanced by centrifugal forces, the claims of tribe, race, class, section, region, and nation, pulling us apart.³⁵

Our language of solidarity has not kept up with the dialectics of need and difference. "Modern life has changed the possibilities of civic solidarity," Ignatieff continues, "and our language stumbles behind like an overburdened porter with a mountain of old cases. . . . [We] need, as much as anything else, language adequate to the times we live in. We need to see how we live now and we can only see with words and images which leave us no escape into nostalgia for some other time and place."³⁶

If I had those words, I would use them. If I perceived those images, I would evoke them. "We need words to keep us

³⁵ Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers: An Essay on Privacy, Solidarity, and the Politics of Being Human* (New York: Viking Press, 1985), pp. 130-131.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 138, 141.

human," Ignatieff concludes, but I with him am yet speechless to fill the void.

Undaunted, I (for one) look forward to facing such challenges. I close, as I often do, by taking heart from one of my favorite socialists, the late Raymond Williams. He wrote toward the end of his brilliant and evocative life:

It is only in a shared belief and insistence that there are practical alternatives that the balance of forces and changes begins to alter. Once the inevitabilities are challenged, we begin gathering our resources for a journey of hope. If there are no easy answers there are still available and discoverable hard answers, and it is these that we can now learn to make and share. This has been, from the beginning, the sense and the impulse of the long revolution.³⁷

³⁷ Raymond Williams, *The Year 2000* (New York: Pantheon, 1983), pp. 268–269.

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