

Beyond Capitalism and Socialism

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“The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles ... Oppressor and oppressed stood in constant opposition to one another, [carrying] on an uninterrupted ... fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.”

- Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)

The cover story of the February 16, 2009, issue of *Newsweek* magazine was titled: “We Are All Socialists Now.” This was a reference to the escalating degree, scope and nature of governmental intervention in capitalist economies worldwide since the onset of the current financial turmoil. A less ironic title for the article might have been: “We Are All Groping for Answers Now.” Bailouts of banks and detoxification of assets are surely not socialism, but they do indicate the extent of the crisis of capitalism.

It might be observed that, in fact, the struggle between capitalism and socialism is ending in the common ruin of the contending systems. The Great Ideological Debate that so dominated the twentieth century now commands fewer and fewer partisans—on either side—as the crises mount and the decades pass. A commentary on the *Newsweek* Web site expressed the sentiment well: “I don’t care what they call the system, I just want the context of my productive life to have some semblance of rationality and fairness. I want things to make sense again.”

The last several decades have witnessed extreme market gyrations under capitalism and the near-total collapse of communism. The resultant disorientation and malaise have led to a search for new answers and new directions. The emergence of the movement for Green politics has been one of the most hopeful developments. Riding a tide that is now moving across the world, favoring localization and communitarian economics, the Greens are presenting a holistic, “off the spectrum” alternative which has the potential to fundamentally transform our culture, politics, and lifeways.

What happened to socialism?

The discourse of ‘transformation’ had formerly been the province of the socialist movement. One hundred and sixty years ago, Marx and Engels’ *Manifesto* raised expectations among the masses by suggesting that the “historical dialectic” is leading inexorably toward the abolition of class division. But hopes for a “revolutionary reconstitution of society at large” have been disappointed. Not a single attempt to implement a socialist transformation has resulted in a classless society or democratic control of the economy.

After about 1980 the evident failure of the socialist movement to achieve its liberatory aspirations emboldened conservative politicians and commentators to proclaim that the ideological contestation between socialism and capitalism was over. The latter had won out, they said, and for good reason: Capitalist economic relations are the basis for freedom, democracy, and prosperity, while socialism tends to foster bureaucracy (or, worse, autocracy), economic torpor, and statist dependency. The British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher went so far as to declare that “There Is No Alternative” to capitalism (the ‘TINA’ assertion).

During the era of Thatcher, Reagan, Clinton, and Blair, interest in socialism waned to such a degree that a whole generation of young radicals (meaning: those who sense that injustice and exploitation are endemic to the current system and who therefore advocate for thoroughgoing social change) came of age less than fully aware of the extent of and the reasons for socialism’s former appeal. Yet the special challenges activists face now—subject to pronouncements about “the end of history” and the lack of alternatives—can hardly be appreciated unless the fate of the socialist movement is understood.

Ascent and Decline

Socialism arose after the French and American revolutions when a handful of ideological theorists recognized that political democracy by itself is not enough to realize egalitarian goals (including democratic control of the economy). Even if all citizens have an equal vote on election day, wealth/status disparities are bound to result in power disparities. In other words, workers might each have one vote at the ballot box and the owners of productive assets might each have one vote, but the disparity of effective power and influence between the two groups is enormous.

Around 1820 writers such as Robert Owen in England and Henri de Saint-Simon in France were expounding bold new ideas: (a) meaningful political democracy could only be achieved under conditions of a classless society, and (b) the achievement of a classless society and democratic control of the economy requires social ownership of the major means of production. This is the essence of socialism.

The movement based on these principles quickly became an influential force in European politics and then gradually gained adherents all over the world. After World War I it suffered a split between its reformist and revolutionary wings, but, in time, each claimed dramatic successes. Socialists achieved majority representation in many national parliaments, while a number of successful revolutionary movements were led by Communists.

Through the ballot or through insurrection there were attempts to institute manifestations of socialism in countries as diverse as Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam, East Germany, Yugoslavia, Britain, Sweden, Ghana, Angola, and others. Under the heading “List of Socialist Countries,” *Wikipedia* delineates almost 60 nation-states “that declared themselves socialist either in their names or their constitutions” at some point in their history.

But the movement peaked during the latter half of the twentieth century. Only 14 countries now still make any reference to socialism in their constitution. There has been something of a revival in a number of Latin American countries during the recent period and there are still supporters worldwide who maintain that “the resistance of the capitalist ruling classes will eventually be overcome.” But as the decades pass, the idea that the fully-realized socialist transformation remains on the historical agenda is warranting less and less credibility.

Enter: the movement for Green politics

The growth in ecological consciousness during the 1960s culminated in the worldwide celebration of the first Earth Day in 1970. It was logical that this phenomenon would find political expression. Soon the liberal and social democratic parties were starting to incorporate policies reflecting a narrow-focused environmentalism into their platforms.

Those who viewed ecology as broadly transformative, rather than “just another issue,” found themselves engaged in a debate. Some advocated for joining (or remaining in) the socialist parties with the objective of “greening the left.” Others advocated for the establishment of new parties. In standing up to criticism that they were “further splitting the left,” these proto-Greens made the case that they were in the process of developing a distinctly alternative worldview “neither left nor right” . . . motivated by an assessment that the socialist vision suffers from fundamental deficiencies in key areas. For example:

- * Socialism is wrong to presume that collectivized property relations could be the basis for subjective, democratic control of a modern industrial economy. The notion is chimerical because the means of production have become centralized, specialized, and complex to such a degree that it's delusive to believe “the people” can democratically run the economy.

- * Socialism’s perspective on history (higher and higher stages of progressive development) is flawed. Greens tend to be more chastened about the trajectory of history. If it’s been a process of “progressive development,” why do we find ourselves on the verge of multiple potentially catastrophic crises, at risk of provoking global ecocide?

- * Socialism’s conception of transformation—the Final Conflict of the Class Struggle resulting in victory for the proletariat, ushering in an era of generalized abundance and security—has not demonstrated any relationship to our lived reality. Greens, instead, tend to view social transformation as a generations-long process of gradually “turning the ship” to go in a different direction . . . at a politico-economic level, yes, but also at deeper levels involving culture and lifeways. Moreover, it’s questionable whether people actually have much interest in identifying with or struggling on behalf of the abstraction: “the working class.” Rather, identification with family, community, and a particular place-on-earth provides real, timeless, natural, and healthy grounding for aspirations of human liberation.

- * Socialism has a misguided techno-optimistic attitude regarding the liberatory potential of industrialism. In many ways the Greens’ eco-communitarian vision of living more lightly and more locally—with an inference of scaling down, slowing down, simplifying and decentralizing—is diametrically opposed to the socialist vision of “unfettered development of the productive forces” and industrial-scale planning.

Finding our way out of the ideological cul-de-sac

One aspect of positing a “third way alternative” (Green) is an implication that the former Great Ideological Debate was focused on the wrong issues. If that was the case, then it should not come as a surprise that each “side” was able to advance a perfectly valid critique of the other. Injustice and exploitation are, indeed, endemic to capitalism; but bureaucracy and statist dependency are, indeed, endemic to socialism. The old debate failed to resolve anything because, while both of the contenders could score points against each other, neither could delineate a path forward.

We’ll remain stuck in an ideological cul-de-sac until we acknowledge that solutions to the crises of modern societies don’t lie in the realm of property relations at all. The debate has been sterile for over a century, and so we find ourselves in a situation where regimes labeled liberal, conservative, or socialist all preside over a common state of malaise characterized by injustice, alienation, unsustainability, superficial democracy, and poor quality of life.

Also important to understand is that, even though capitalist theory and socialist theory are each deficient in their particular ways, at a deep level the two share critical values in common. In “The Fall of Communism, The Triumph of Capital” (*Fifth Estate*, Spring 1992) David Watson writes: “The desire for industrial growth and the expansion of needs, for the exploitation and valorization of nature for exchange, is shared by bourgeois and commissar alike; it is the ideology of the modern world, East and West, left and right.”

“Communist” China increasingly relies on market mechanisms while “capitalist” America socializes the losses of its largest enterprises and all but nationalizes its banking system. At the core of modern mega-systems—whether they profess to embody socialist or capitalist property relations—is an industrial-statist Leviathan managed by wealth/power elites to advance their own self interest.

Toward the greening of our civilization

The *Communist Manifesto* disparaged “the idiocy of rural life” and extolled the “subjection of nature’s forces to man and machinery . . . the clearing of whole continents.” Greens prioritize a revival of our relationship with the land.

Socialism envisioned an internationally planned economy with a worldwide division of labor. Greens want to move toward direct production for our communities, suggesting that relocalization is the key to devolution of power and subjective control of the economy.

There *is* an alternative to capitalism, but it’s not some new universal socio-economic system. Humanity will not find a path to liberation through collectivization of the means of production.

Greens have a more nuanced, more sophisticated sensibility regarding both the process and the objective of social change. David Watson: “We have to talk tentatively about how an unprecedented, megatech empire and its corresponding constellation of cultures might become a qualitatively different kind of society; how a grid might become an organic weave of diverse, egalitarian, communal societies; and how an atomized, mass human being might again become a whole person embedded in a community.”

New ideas about alternative pathways are now “in the air.” The broad-based, multi-generational project of greening our long-misguided civilization has only just begun.