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Socialism

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**1. Introduction**

Rich in diversity, socialism nevertheless has at its theoretical base a clear configuration of tenets. Socialism has been and remains a coherent ideology, even though supporters of some of its variants find others distinctly unappealing. This coherence allows the variants to be grouped into a resilient social and political movement striving, since its emergence in the early nineteenth century, to put its tenets into practice. To retain significance, resonance and appeal, this short book concludes, socialism needs to keep but reframe its core principles, abandon some of the baggage which has allowed it to be disparaged, and fight the battles of the present.

Socialism is an ideology of the left based on a distinctive combination of three main principles: equality, freedom and community, around which various other principles revolve. The notoriously imprecise political term ‘left’ emerged in the French revolutionary period. In the new assembly of 1789 campaigners for liberal and egalitarian reform sat at the left of the chamber. Liberalism is based on a defence of individual freedom, which can involve either reform or resistance to change. As it includes radical reformist liberals, the left is thus broader than socialism. ‘Left’ came to signify radical political ideas, movements and parties seeking wider and more effective participation, social change, various forms of egalitarianism and reform or abolition of capitalism (Lamb, 2016: 521).

Capitalism is a social and economic system based on a combination of three key features: private ownership of property; self-interested pursuit of such property; and the exchange of goods and the market as means of determining prices of services and goods (Saunders, 1995: 3-9). In prioritizing private property ownership, socialists argue, capitalism encourages individualistic acquisitiveness, discourages community-mindedness, entrenches inequality and allows too much individual rather than social freedom.

Capitalism has, in response to the financial crisis that began in 2007, survived around the globe by means of austerity for the many. While capitalism may recover in the short-term, more fundamental is the inability of Planet Earth to sustain capitalist processes which are exhausting resources, polluting the environment and bringing irreversible geographical change detrimental to the human species among others. Socialism has been considered as an alternative by some of those enduring austerity along with their sympathisers. Notwithstanding its potential to foster human flourishing socialism has, however, sometimes been interpreted, formulated and manipulated in ways which have the opposite effect.

A very prominent form of socialism in the twentieth century, especially after Josef Stalin took control of the theory and practice of communism in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), was Marxism-Leninism. The USSR was founded in 1922 by V.I. Lenin, with Stalin’s assistance, after Lenin’s revolutionary seizure of power in Russia in 1917 (Service, 2000: 308-23, 455-61). Marxism-Leninism drew ostensibly on his ideas which in turn interpreted those of Karl Marx. In practice, Marxism Leninism implemented public ownership in the form a centrally-planned and publicly-owned economy, was authoritarian in theory and practice, shunned Western democracy and suppressed opposition. Variants of Marxism-Leninism, often referred to simply as communism, emerged around the world, including the Peoples Republic of China which, founded by the revolutionary leader Mao Zedong, is one of several communist states still in existence today (Holmes, 2009: 1-13). Referring to Marxism-Leninism by the generic ‘socialism’, the radical economist Minqi Li, whilst not advocating the adoption of abuse and authoritarianism, suggests that something can be retrieved from Marxism-Leninism. ‘Only with public ownership and society-wide planning’, he argues, ‘could society achieve ecological sustainability without sacrificing the basic needs of the great majority of the population’ (Li, 2013: 41).

Many radical environmentalists would challenge Li, suggesting instead that a federation of small-scale communities would be far more suitable for the task of surviving the environmental hazards that are already causing irreparable damage. Many socialists would question his argument (Li, 2008: 80-2) that Chinese socialism could have introduced a new form of democracy had it not been hijacked by people who used the communist system for their own interests. Socialists could, indeed, explore new opportunities for people to have a key role in building socialism for themselves, rather than rely on top-down guidance. As Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin (2018: 11-16) suggest, in the present period of capitalist decline following the financial crisis the tendency for activists in a range of countries to widen their activities from protest to involvement in party politics reflects an opportunity to draw on dissatisfaction with contemporary capitalism to revive a genuinely democratic socialism which takes environmental concerns seriously.

Looking back to the early 1990s, however, when capitalism was in the ascendency and the ecological problems far less obvious, the prospects for socialism appeared grim. It was fashionable to declare that, having undermined itself and been exposed as a fundamentally malign doctrine with little value, socialism was a spent force. The wide variety of its manifestations and what appeared to be contradictions among socialist ideas led some observers, moreover, to the different, but no less damning, conclusion that the term ‘socialism’ is meaningless (Beecher, 2013: 370). This book offers a very different analysis, contending that socialism remains as a coherent force on the left. This will become evident as the different variants are discussed. Let us first, however, consider ways in which socialists of various hues have responded to the apparent demise of their ideology.

1.1 Socialist decline and recovery

In 1989 a large demonstration in Beijing calling for reforms to Chinese communism was quelled when the state resorted to brutality, bloodshed and repression. In the same year a series of revolutions erupted in the Eastern European Marxist-Leninist states. By the early 1990s not only had those states fallen but the USSR which dominated them had imploded. Whether this reflected weaknesses in Marx’s theories became a moot point.

Marx’s work revolves around three main nodes: the analysis of capitalism in terms of social class; a theory of historical trajectory and a movement for emancipation from exploitation (Wright, 1993: 15-21). The notion of exploitation Marx formulated in his early work of the 1840s builds on the broader meaning of immoral use by a person or person of other people for the ends of the former. Marx was concerned more specifically with the use by the property-owners in class divided societies, without appropriate recompense, of the labour of people who need to work to earn a living. He argued that this happens in the labour process of capitalism either consciously by members of the owning class or systemically as the owning class benefits from exploitation of the proletariat (industrial working class) with varying degrees of recognition that this is happening (Burnham and Lamb, 2019: 101-20). In the latter case the labour and lives of the proletarians are in a condition of alienation from their work, products and indeed their human nature (Burnham and Lamb, 2019: 67-100). The emphasis on the system, or structure, is a prominent feature of Marxist writing, but the extent to which Marxism-Leninism replaced the capitalist with one which introduced a new form of exploitation is debatable. Nevertheless, if so this justifies neither the view which begun to circulate in the 1990s that Marxism itself had been undermined nor the argument that socialism in general was in its death throes. Overcoming or at least minimizing exploitation remains a basic goal for socialism. In the twenty-first century this has led socialism to challenge and be challenged by neoliberalism, which advocates the minimization of restraints on, and regulation of, global capitalism.

This supposed demise of socialism was celebrated by neoliberal thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama who pronounced the end of history, meaning liberal capitalism would henceforth face no significant challenges. ‘Socialism’, Fukuyama (1992: 106) declared, ‘is no more appealing as an economic model for developing countries than it is for advanced industrial societies’. Perhaps more alarming for socialists were views expressed by some of their own political philosophers. ‘As a system’, André Gorz (1994: vii) announced for example, ‘socialism is dead’.

The alleged advantages of the victorious capitalism were not accepted without question. Saral Sarker (1991), for example, stressed that many people in capitalist developing countries could only dream of the economic living standards of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) which, he acknowledged, was nevertheless an awful authoritarian regime which wasted natural resources. Change was needed, but capitalism was not the answer. Socialist feminists too insisted that the direction of change need not be towards capitalism. Feminism is concerned with exclusion of women from roles and circumstances which enable empowerment and flourishing. While Marxism-Leninism had not allowed women to flourish, capitalism, against which socialism continued to campaign, was linked with patriarchy (Haug, 1991).

Feminist socialism is one of many variants, ranging from the radical revolutionary to the moderate social democratic. Social democrats hold that a form of socialism at least tolerable to people of other ideological persuasions can be introduced by means of regulation, achieved through parliamentary politics. Some social democrats in the early 1990s argued that a revived or resuscitated socialism need not attempt to uproot capitalism but rather subject it to significant reform and control. In 1994 such a mild social democratic view was voiced by the new British Labour Party leader, Tony Blair.

Blair argued that while the Marxist strand of socialism, based as he saw it on central control of industry and production, was dead, the traditional ethical strand was very much alive, albeit in need of revival. As a practicing Christian and member of the Christian Socialist Movement Blair thought in terms of family, insisting that individuals were interdependent but social beings, undetachable from their society. This, for him, was the basis of a democratic form of socialism having as its values social justice, the equal worth of citizens, equality of opportunity and community (Seldon, 2005: 516-19).

Hyphenating his position as ‘social-ism’, Blair sought to ‘move beyond the battle between public and private sector and see the two as working in partnership’ (Blair 1994: 4). On this basis the notion of ‘The Third Way’ or ‘*Die Neue Mitte*’ became popular among theorists such as Anthony Giddens and politicians including the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) leader Gerhard Schröder. They argued that traditional social democracy with its focus on nationalized industries and services was discredited and outdated, as were the obsessively free-market ideas of neo-liberalism. To retrieve the ethical tradition social democracy needed to be thoroughly modernized (Giddens, 1998: 2000). Drawing on the idea of the radical centre which had been circulating in recent political thinking, Giddens (1998: 44-6) stressed that the centre was not necessarily moderate. The centre could propose substantial social change, the appeal of which would not be restricted to the traditional right or left. The third way achieved considerable electoral results in Europe. Having distanced himself from the principle of common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange and styled his party as New Labour, for example, Blair won three successive general elections.

Nevertheless, the electoral success of the modernized social democracy did not mean that henceforth the ideological spectrum would extend no further to the left. Even before the third way was pronounced there were signs that socialism might have a radical future. At the end of 1994 in Chiapas, southern Mexico, for example, activists of the Zapatista movement suddenly took direct revolutionary action against the Mexican capitalist state, catching the attention of people unattracted to the old forms of socialism. Reflecting later upon the appearance of his movement the charismatic, masked Zapatista leader who styled himself Subcomandante Marcos (2004: 5-6) stressed that there had been ‘two major gaps in the movement of the revolutionary Left in Latin America’. First, there were the indigenous peoples from which his movement had emerged. Second there were minorities such as LGBT people who were not only excluded from the discourses of the Latin American Left but also disregarded and sometimes even opposed by communist parties.