

# BOOK REVIEW

## SOCIALISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Vol. 1: Marxism and Socialist Theory

Vol. 2: Socialism Today and Tomorrow

Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel

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*reviewed by Jeremy Brecher*

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Our lives are so enclosed within the societies in which we live that it can be difficult to envision those societies ever being fundamentally changed. We know from history that revolutions do occur, that societies do change radically, and that ordinary people who in normal times seem only the objects of history do at times intervene and force a profound redirection of the societies in which they live. But even to think about the possible outcomes of such a course of events earns the pejorative 'utopian.' It is striking that even the New Left of the 1960's, its alleged romanticism notwithstanding, produced no articulate vision of what a liberated future would be for our society.

As one discovers the imperfection or evils of one's own society, it is only natural to look at other societies for alternatives. Since the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, the societies created in Russia, China, Cuba and elsewhere under the banner of Marxism-Leninism have appeared as the principal alternative to the capitalist societies of

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the West. For over sixty years, these societies have served as the models for many who would replace capitalism with something else.

Yet these societies, whatever their accomplishments, have not created a world many of us would like to live in, let alone one which realizes the aspirations originally summarized in the idea of socialism. The great majority of working people possess little control over their work, their daily life, or the overall development of their society. The most elementary of personal freedoms are suppressed. Socialist 'brothers' are sent to kill each other on the battlefields. Male-dominated élites, often from privileged ethnic groups, hold the best jobs and the positions of power.

This outcome of the revolutionary project has led many to turn away from the idea of trying to create a fundamentally different kind of society. If they do not fully endorse the capitalist *status quo*, they believe that only the slowest and most marginal changes in it can avoid the tyranny that appears to be the inevitable outcome of modern revolutions.

This two-volume work boldly attempts to make thinkable a complete restructuring of American society which would meet the needs and aspirations of workers, women, minority group members, and citizens-at-large. It is equally distant from those who would 'seize State power' through a 'workers party' to establish a 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' and from those who would add a bit of social investment and expanded social welfare to patch up the capitalist economy. It is rooted in the small but persistent tradition of those like Anton Pannekoek and Cornelius Castoriadis who have advocated workers' councils as an alternative to both social democratic and Leninist forms of State socialism, but it adds a great deal to what that tradition has to say about what socialism could be in an advanced society.

The first volume, *Marxism and Socialist Theory*, consists primarily of a critique of what the authors call 'orthodox Marxism' and the attempt to develop an alternative theory of society. After an introductory chapter on problems of epistemology — now apparently *de rigueur* among Marxists — it develops an ambitious theory of society. The second volume, *Socialism Today and Tomorrow*, after a non-technical summary of Vol. 1, consists of a long critical analysis of post-revolutionary society in Russia, China, and Cuba, followed by an effort to describe how a very different kind of socialism might look in the U.S.

The books are guided by three socialist norms: collective self-management, variety of social outcomes, and human solidarity. Self-management is interpreted to mean that people should determine decisions to the extent that they are affected by them — in contrast to either simple majority rule or simple individual liberty. Variety is taken very seriously: there is no one correct answer for political, economic, or social questions, and it is wrong to try to impose one. Human solidarity is seen as potential in human nature, but subject to encouragement by social arrangements. These socialist norms guide the analysis of contemporary American society, the criticism of current 'socialist' societies, and the proposals for what socialism should be like here. (The possibility of conflict among these norms, or with other possible goals they might exclude, is not considered.)

Both 'orthodox Marxism' and the workers' council tradition are rooted in Marx's conception of the primacy of production in the development of society, treating economics as the 'basis' of society and all else as mere 'superstructure.' But this approach has come under increasing pressure lately, not so much from external opponents of socialism as from those who have been trying conscientiously to analyze society in these terms. Leading writers like E.P. Thompson have urged that the metaphor of 'base and superstructure' be abandoned, or like Raymond Williams have advocated that 'production' be used to include virtually all human activity. Specific questions — notably those having to do with politics, with gender relations, and with relations among social groups — have turned out to be difficult to answer on the basis of economic relations alone.

Political realities, too, have raised doubts about this approach. Socialists traditionally held that a socialist economy would automatically eliminate the inequalities between men and women and among different races and ethnic groups, as all shared equally in the production and consumption of wealth. In practice, however, such inequalities have remained intact, if in somewhat altered form, through enormous changes in economic structure in many different societies. Similarly, authoritarian State structures, far from 'withering away,' have often intensified in the wake of revolutions which eliminated private capitalism. Feminist, nationalist, and anarchist critics of Marxism have argued that there are forms of oppression other than class oppression, and that working class power in the economy would not necessarily cure them.

As an alternative to the traditional Marxist approach, the authors of this book propose to look at society in terms of four spheres: politics, economics, kinship, and community. Politics includes the general coordination of human action; economics the transformation of material objects; kinship all that pertains to the biological and social reproduction of individuals from generation to generation; community all the kinds of group identities and practices that develop in the sphere of culture, whether ethnic, racial, national, artistic, religious, or otherwise.

While the authors use the metaphor of 'spheres,' they emphasize that these are not really separate. They are like processes going on simultaneously in the same body, and they interact with each other. In a sort of radical version of functionalism, each is forced to operate in a way compatible with the others, and may even help reproduce them. Similarly, society is simultaneously made up of institutions (for which the authors use the term 'boundary') and of human beings (the 'centre'), whose aspirations and behaviour must in the long run be compatible with the institutions.

Society can be approached from any one of these four dimensions: as a political, economic, kinship, or community system. Each approach will deal well with some subjects but tend to be blind to others. The authors urge that, far from trying to establish one of these approaches as 'correct,' we should see them as complementary, each adding insights that the others might miss — and bringing out the interests of social groups that the others might slight. "We seek a synthesis *without* the old kind of pinnacle."

Painful as it may be to live with ambiguity, I think this rejection of an authoritative theory and the recognition that different viewpoints and emphases are necessary and can compensate for each other is extremely salutary. Indeed, I wish the authors had gone even further, done without even their four pinnacles (which like so many such schemas seems to be arbitrary), and presented their schema in the spirit of 'here are four aspects of our society no analysis can afford to overlook,' rather than in the spirit of 'these are the four basic elements of any society.' Such an approach would encourage a continuing process of analysis, research, discussion, and argument in which numerous emphases are ever-present, in which new ones are ever-welcome, and in which the participants are ever-ready to incorporate whatever they can from each other. (Indeed, one wonders whether the process to

which this book contributes is most aptly compared to scientific theory, or whether it is not better described as a political dialogue.)

In the 'political sphere,' the authors provide a devastating critique of both the theory and the practice of Marxist-Leninist parties. 'Democratic centralism' in fact generates a political élite concerned with establishing its own authority, first over its followers and ultimately over society, while it renders 'the masses' subservient at best, terrorized at worst.

In contrast to much of the workers' council tradition, they argue that under socialism politics will still continue, rather than wither away to leave only economic coordination. They propose, therefore, a system of political decision-making which would follow the basic principles of self-management. Local councils would include all residents of a given neighbourhood. These would send delegates to councils at regional and national levels. Each issue would be determined by the vote of those most directly affected by it (using televised debate and voting procedures to allow direct participation by all those affected where desired). All groups would be allowed to create political organizations and parties, and diversity of outcomes would be encouraged. While the authors do not attempt to specify precisely how to balance the interests of those directly involved with an issue and those only indirectly involved, they do show that their approach would allow rational and intelligent decisions about such matters.

In the sphere of economics, the authors emphasize that classes in modern society are based not only on ownership or non-ownership of property, but also on an actual role in the production process. In particular, they argue that modern society has created what they call the 'coordinator class,' which does not own the means of production, but does the planning and organizing of production in contrast to the working class, which merely carries out its orders. They argue that, where Marxist-Leninist-led revolutions have eliminated private capitalism, it is this class, rather than the working class, which has established control over the economy. They portray the programmes of social democratic and Eurocommunist parties as leading logically to the dominion of this group, only without the control by a distinct political élite that persists in the Communist countries of the East.

On the basis of their socialist norms, the authors make an incisive critique of both the market and central State planning as ways of organizing a socialist economy. The market deals with people as isolated

individuals, underrates their common, social needs, and undermines solidarity by generating a war of all against all. Central planning puts excessive power in the hands of a small group and prevents self-management. Neither allows an adequate evaluation of the human impact of different production decisions.

The authors develop in detail an alternative concept they call 'Decentralized Socialist Planning,' a much fleshed-out version of Pannekoek's or Castoriadis' workers' council ideas. The workers in each workplace constitute a council which would democratically manage the workplace and send delegates to local, regional, and national councils of its industry and of all industry. Residents of each neighbourhood likewise form consumer councils, which also send delegates to councils at regional and national levels. Each council proposes its ideas for the annual economic plan. Knowing that any plan will require the approval of all the other councils, each one will try to understand the needs — human as well as material — of the others and incorporate them in its proposals. Through a process of give-and-take, many of whose mechanics are detailed in the text, a common plan is developed and agreed to.

Many problems left unsolved by its somewhat vague predecessors are successfully addressed in this discussion, which is the best I am familiar with on how to organize a socialist economy. Of course, some matters remain to be worked out. For example, there is no single unit in which all factors of production are measured for the plan: different kinds of labour and scarce materials are all treated independently. Individuals and groups are to be allowed to place an 'average burden' on the economy, but there is no explanation of how different kinds of labour and resources would weigh in calculating such an average burden.

In the sphere of kinship, the authors are most critical of those who believe that issues of sexism will be taken care of 'automatically' by the entry of women into employment in a socialist society. On the contrary, they emphasize that sexual inequality must be addressed directly. It needs to be challenged in the workplace, in politics, in community life, but especially in the kinship sphere itself, where men have to take over their full share of the work of child-rearing and other domestic labour, and where both women and men need to move beyond gender-based personalities and role definitions. Communal living arrangements, while only part of a wide spectrum of possible choices,

would be encouraged. One question not addressed is where 'bottom-line' responsibility for having and caring for children would reside.

The discussion of the sphere of 'community' is the most original — although also the most problematic — part of their approach. They really are fighting a battle on two fronts. On the one hand, they have learned from black nationalists that attachment to a group culture can be a powerful and valuable force. On the other hand, they recognize that ethnic, national, religious, and similar loyalties can be an incredibly destructive factor in today's world. The goal they set themselves, therefore, is to separate what is positive and what is destructive in the 'community sphere.'

The authors start from the problem of a dominant and a subordinate community, drawing largely on Franz Fanon's analysis of colonialism. In such a context, it is a form of revolt against domination for the dominated group to identify with their own culture and traditions, rather than trying to assimilate to the culture of the dominant group. The oppressors, conversely, define those they dominate as sub-human in order to justify their own behaviour — thereby diminishing their own humanity. The authors argue that this model applies, with some differences, to the relations between black and white within the U.S. For blacks to integrate into the dominant white culture is simply to submit to oppression; 'black nationalism' (by which they seem to indicate not advocacy of an independent black State, but an identification with black culture and tradition) is a healthy form of resistance. White racism, conversely, is an ideology and set of practices designed to preserve and justify domination. Integration and cultural homogenization represent a disguised demand that oppressed groups conform to the dominant culture.

But alongside this issue of oppression and revolt there is another set of issues. It may be natural and good for particular groups to form their own identity and a common set of approaches to the various possible ways to live. But we know from experience that these groups — whether ethnic, national, religious, or other — all too often develop antagonistic relations to each other and engage in conflict or even warfare. Each group tends to define all others as a potential threat to its existence or well-being. This leads to situations of threat and counter-threat, through which groups really do become a danger to each other and cooperation for common purposes becomes severely hampered.

To distinguish the positive from the negative aspects of community identity, the authors propose the concept of 'socialist intercommunalism.' They argue that in the 'community sphere,' all groups should be guaranteed the resources and the freedom from interference to develop their own ways of life. These groups have the right to define their own membership; individuals would be free to leave them, resulting in such groups eventually becoming voluntary rather than biological in character. While they could be criticized from without for failing to conform to socialist norms, they would be free to do as they choose within the community sphere. But society would aim to transform the general attitude among such groups from one of hostility and mutual threat to one in which cultural diversity was recognized as a boon to all, something from which all could learn and be enriched.

I think this approach is entirely on the right track. The range of human cultures and communities that encircle the globe is the greatest resource we have, and its diversity is to be encouraged; one of the worst things about modern capitalism is its relentless destruction of human cultures. At the same time, the phenomena of ethnocentrism and xenophobia are the most destructive forces in the world today, ones that must be tamed if the species is to survive.

The problem raised but not answered by the authors' approach lies in the fact that 'communities' do not generally define themselves as a limited sphere, unconcerned with what goes on in the political, economic, or kinship realm. Throughout the world, ethnic groups struggle for control of the State; nations battle for trade; churches attempt to regulate the relations of men and women. To propose that socialist norms rule in the non-community spheres is to demand a complete redefinition of the nature of those communities, because in reality most of those groups now have their own norms which conflict with the authors' proposed socialist ones.

Further, many groups consider their own superiority or antagonism to other groups to be *of the essence* rather than incidental to their identity. For many religions, for example, *not* to consider themselves God's chosen people and all others damned would be an act of apostacy — it would be the equivalent of asking a socialist to believe in the sanctity of social hierarchy.

'Socialist intercommunalism' is by far the best perspective and formulation of a goal on these questions that I know. But I think we need to recognize that it will require fundamental change in many

'communities.' We should encourage ecumenical movements that preserve group identity while recognizing the legitimacy of other communities. But we have to acknowledge that there are other norms in many communities which are simply incompatible with socialist norms.

The authors do not try to take this analysis beyond the level of the nation. Indeed, they seem to assume the national State as the highest unit of the socialist society. But the level of nations seems to be the one at which an alternative vision — along the lines of their concept of socialist intercommunalism — is most desperately needed. After all, what better reason for making a fundamental change in the organization of society could there be than that the present State system threatens to annihilate the species? And conversely, what is the point of making a revolution in one country if it just means that we'll be incinerated under socialism instead of under capitalism? This is not meant as a criticism of the books at hand (it would apply as well to much of my own past work), but as a plea that the abolition of national sovereignty (presumably in a global socialist commonwealth which preserves the widest possible variety of cultures and communities) be considered not incidental to but of the essence of any socialist vision. At a time when even the Daniel Bells are announcing the obsolescence of national forms of social and political organization, can we afford to take them for granted?

In the concluding, strategic section of the second volume, the authors offer an interesting scenario. In the face of Reagan-style conservatism, they envision the development through the 1980's of a populist, anti-capitalist but not socialist movement, taking an increasingly important role within the Democratic Party, based on a broad coalition of labour, minority, feminist, citizens' action, and other social movements. They expect the programme of such a movement, however, to be limited to what can be achieved within the framework of a capitalist, racist, sexist, non-participatory democracy. They propose, therefore, that those committed to socialist goals cooperate with such a movement, but maintain distinct organizational forms and their own, more radical programmes. Such a socialist movement would be based on the principle of cooperation with autonomy for the various groups (women, minorities, gays, etc.) within it. It would provide an alternative for those who discovered the limitations of reform movements, so that they would not simply drop out in frustration.

This approach has much to be said for it. Certainly the need for an independent, radical voice analyzing the problems of the society and articulating alternatives is great. The relation of such a movement to the (hopefully) emerging reform wing of the Democratic Party is more problematical, however. The difficulty lies in the fact that, in the past at least, this social sector has defined its job as *keeping the people out of the streets*, managing social conflict and performing the role of mediator at best, cop at worst, toward mass social movements. This history stretches at least from the pressure on the CIO to halt the sitdowns during the New Deal to the liberal Democratic and trade union pressure against SNCC sit-ins and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenge at the Democratic Convention in 1964 to the tremendous pressures brought to keep Martin Luther King from publicly opposing the Vietnam War. In all of these cases (and many more), the left of the Democratic Party opposed movement activists and tried to limit mass participation in direct action. Cooperation is by all means to be encouraged, but it cannot be the cooperation of the docile citizen and the cop.

I think it is hard for all of us really to grasp what cataclysmic times we are living in. Actually, we are witnessing the collapse of a whole world order, of an economic system and a State system in deeper and more general crisis than at any time since the rise of capitalism and the Nation-State. Humpty Dumpty is not going to be put back together again. The forms of irrationality and chaos, ranging from Reaganomics to the war between Britain and Argentina, are only going to become more general. In such a situation, no pre-established strategy may be possible — events may simply move too erratically. But a clear vision of a free and human society, based on a conviction that creating such a society is possible and worthwhile, is invaluable. *Socialism in Theory and Practice* makes a great contribution to the development of such a vision.