

Socialism Is What You Make It

a response to "Looking Forward"

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There was something very moving to me about these letters. Something about the way they show a socialist society as a world people make—living, learning, developing their values, and creating solutions to the problems they face. This process itself is what constitutes the alternative to capitalism and to a top-down, bureaucratic socialism. And it seems so possible: dealt with concretely, the problems of building socialism are not so different from the things people already do in their lives.

One consequence of seeing socialism as what we make it, rather than as something that can be derived from a set of pre-established principles, is that a socialist society remains an arena of choice and conflict. All the things which might seem desirable to one or another individual or group cannot be done simultaneously. And so choice and conflict over whether to stress craft production or automation, or whether individuals should be able to trade off their childcare responsibilities, will persist. These are not only conflicts over means to agreed ends, or over differing interests, but also over values, over what constitutes the common good. The virtue of a socialist society—as we can see in these letters—is not that it eliminates social conflict, but that it allows that conflict to take a form that encourages the free development and fulfillment of the needs and values of all members of the community.

For this reason, I would like to address my comments to the *dimensions of choice* these letters suggest a socialist society would face: the questions that people in such a society will be called upon to answer. The answers to these questions cannot be derived from the notion of socialism itself; they will have to grow out of the learning experiences and evolving values of those who answer them. Nor will the answers that seem most desirable in reply to one question necessarily be

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compatible with those that seem best in answer to another question: mutual compromise and creative coordination or synthesis of different values and practices will be central to making a socialist society work.

SOME BROAD CONSIDERATIONS

Social Boundaries

One of the best features of these letters is the way they show the transformation of the boundaries between the spheres of social life we think of in terms of "the economy," "the family," "the household," "the community," "the workplace," "the individual," and the like. These boundaries do not completely disappear; there is still, for example, a boundary between the home and the workplace. But the boundaries themselves have become subject to shaping by conscious community decisions. For example, in one workplace, a decision is made that childcare will be done in part within the workplace, rather than entirely in the home or school. In another case, it is decided that society as a whole should play a role in determining the division of labor within the household by insisting that fathers bear a share of responsibility for the care of their children. On the other hand, communal households are in general allowed to determine their own internal division of labor as they see fit, provided it meets certain (unspecified) criteria of fairness.

Not all determinations of the boundary between public and private spheres will be easy. For example, who will have bottom-line responsibility for care of children? And how will such responsibility relate to the control of conception?

The change in the nature of boundaries between social spheres has several aspects. First, the boundaries themselves become the object of social decision-making; they are not (as now within capitalist society) the unintended results of decisions being made within particular spheres. Second, social decision-making cuts across these boundaries, so that for instance what in current society would be an "economic" decision of whether to build houses or apartments is not separated from the "social" decision of whether people want to live in nuclear families or larger communal groups. What is produced is not a question separate from how it is produced. "Economic," "political," and "social" planning are all aspects of the single question: how do we want to live? Third, while boundaries are no longer absolute, they remain as an aspect of decentralization, a way in which particular individuals and groups can regulate their own activity within guidelines set by the broader society but without its continual direction or interference.

Time

The society described in these letters is marked by a series of temporal cycles. These include such things as the daily and weekly work cycles, the 10-year cycle in which the Seattle community reviews and revises its economic plan, the five-year period for which Jane and the man she lives with make a personal contract, and the individual (and generational) life cycle in which individuals are born, grow up, and ultimately grow old.

These cycles are very important in the way continuity and change are organized in the society described. Since all possibilities cannot be realized at once, decisions must be made and carried out over a period of time. To have every decision constantly subject to reversal would make life chaotic: if people decided to create bus systems, built the necessary factories and roads, and reorganized urban life around the expected traffic flows, and then suddenly decided to have subways instead, they would be in trouble. Yet it is essential that even the most basic decisions be reversible in some way. The 10-year review of the Seattle economy and the 5-year domestic agreement provide a way that continuity can be maintained over time, interdependent activities can be coordinated, and yet decisions can be reconsidered and reversed periodically. The ability to reverse past decisions is the soul of socialist freedom, the only way to escape the "dead hand of the past."

Of course, time-cycles are of different lengths, and this can cause problems. Children mature and may not choose to fit into an economic plan they had no voice in establishing. Community, domestic, and workplace cycles may not entirely coincide. But that merely illustrates why the management of a socialist society is in part a problem of coordination.

Space

The reorganization of space has been an important part of the social reconstruction described in these letters. This has taken several forms. As an aspect of economic decentralization, regions have become increasingly autonomous, with invisible economic boundaries dividing them from each other. This results in far less movement of people and materials across these boundaries: New Jerseyites no longer commute in massive number to New York City; Seattle factories produce furniture for regional consumption, rather than airplanes for a global market. Conversely, space within communities tends to become less bounded: workplaces are within walking or biking distance of homes, care for young children is provided within two blocks of homes, etc. Yet at the household level, such functions as cooking or personal offices are tending to move out of the household unit to separate buildings.

The achievement of this society lies not in any particular form of spatial structure, but in its ability to make spatial organization—like social boundaries—an object of social decision-making.

THE DIVISION OF LABOR

As these letters make clear, the division of labor intersects with virtually all the other key questions of what a socialist society would be like. The relations between old and young, men and women, different regions of the country and even the world—all are implicated. Indeed, one of the strengths of "Looking Forward" is that it shows that the division of labor must be addressed not just as an "economic" question, but as one involving politics, gender, age, race, and virtually every other aspect of human life. Because the division of labor is controlled by society, rather than by conflicting power centers and uncontrolled social forces, people have the opportunity to make choices that simply can't be made in today's society. Some of the lessons implicit in these letters can perhaps be drawn out by looking at division of labor in terms of these dimensions. I will start with the most intimate and move toward the most global.

Work and the Individual

A socialist society is not a fantasy world in which people's needs are met without work; labor remains a necessity. But how does the fact that labor is necessary get expressed at the level of the individual? It appears as a socially-imposed limitation on individual freedom. So there arises an inevitable tension between individual freedom and the necessity of work.

In the society described in these letters, labor is clearly considered compulsory. Guidelines have been established at a national level providing that each person of a given age shall work a certain number of hours. This is combined (at least in some regions) with a specified income to which all workers are entitled.

One question that would arise for a society implementing this approach would be the question of sanctions for violation of such norms. Would there be some kind of legal process for determining violations? Would those who were found in violation (say, by avoiding work) be subject to sanctions?

Related is the question of whether there is still a tie between income and work. What happens to an individual who, because of illness, age or other reasons is unable to work? Conversely, is the security of the individual's income established through her or his relation to a job?

The labor time guideline has the virtue of encouraging equality of contribution. But it eliminates all individual control over the question of how much time to work. One choice facing a socialist society would be whether to allow individuals and/or groups to increase or decrease their labor time and change their income proportionately.

This socialist society makes decisions on a regional basis that determine an overall social division of labor; a regional plan allocates resources to various forms of industry, community development, and the like. How do people's individual choices about what they want to do get coordinated with this overall social division of labor? In other words, what replaces the allocation function played in capitalism by the labor market?

Answers to this question could vary in terms of time. At one extreme, individuals could be rotated through every job in the community, changing frequently. At the other extreme, an individual could hold the same job as long as it existed. In the society described, individuals rotate through many jobs in their workplace, but not through different workplaces. But there is no reason in principle that job rotation or job bidding could not be extended beyond the individual workplace.

This is one of a class of trade-offs in which both individual freedom and the structuring of collective loyalties are involved. The fact that a worker is part of a particular workgroup is a limitation on individual freedom. It has the advantage that it tends to build strong workgroups whose members know each other, understand the unit as a whole, and share an interest in its future. On the other hand, this has the liability of its advantage: it tends to build loyalty to a particular workplace and workgroup at the expense of the community as a whole. The job rotation which is used within each workplace to reduce divisions within the workforce and let each individual appreciate the enterprise as a whole would serve the same function if individuals rotated through all the jobs in the community.

Another dimension concerns the role of individual choice in work assignments. In the furniture factory, for example, there is no equivalent to "job bidding." Individuals are assigned to work teams which are responsible for particular operations. This has the advantages of reducing "special interests" within the workforce and of reducing individual boredom, but it also reduces individual choice.

Another question is the kind of personal identification an individual makes with work activities. Present day society includes at one extreme the "professional" whose whole identity is wrapped up with a particular kind of work activity and its social role definitions, at the other extreme casual laborers who float among a large number of menial tasks without an identification with any of them. The society

described in these letters seems to have chosen a third alternative: identification with a particular workplace and its collective. One appears to identify as a member of a furniture collective or a health team, not as a member of a particular profession or as an individual for whom work is incidental to personal identity.

It is important here to be conscious of the tradeoffs. The social-psychological structure of a "career" or a "profession" has certain virtues. It involves the idea of work as a "calling," not merely a burden, which partially nullifies the compulsory nature of labor. On the other hand, it creates a one-sided identity and a professional subculture that can be somewhat isolated from the rest of society.

To some extent, this one-sidedness is implicit in all work-based identities. The growth of a workforce composed of individuals with no identification with a particular workplace or work process has been an impoverishment, but it has also been a liberation from narrow, limited concepts of social role. There is something positive in considering oneself an individual or a member of society first, a worker of a particular kind only as an accidental matter. The questions of how work organization interacts with individual identities will play an important role in both individual life and political processes within a socialist society.

The society described has clearly decided to try to reduce the limitations that compulsory labor places on individual freedom, and to expand the realm of individual freedom to the extent that the wealth of the community allows. The industrial sabbatical, for example, is an institution which could be indefinitely expanded, and the labor time guidelines reduced, until work was a relatively minor part of an individual's total life.

Work and the Community

One obvious issue in a decentralized, community-based socialism is who is included in the community? Is it simply a matter of who lives in a given geographical area? If so, are there controls on the movement of people? What are the implications of this for equality, both within and between regions? Here again one can see a tension between individual freedom and community control. Massive influx of "outsiders" can easily disrupt a community, but a community's power to exclude me is a bar to my liberty. The New Jersey community deals with this by allowing immigrants but giving established community members preference in such matters as choice of housing. This of course creates a sort of class division between old residents and newcomers.

A related question is whether there is a sort of market, in which

individuals "shop" for communities to belong to or regions in which to live. Do individuals move to places with types of schools or social organization they approve of, work they like, or a higher standard of living? If so, how does this affect the ability of communities to control their common life?

An important social decision lies in defining what constitutes "labor," as opposed to some other category of activity. Should, for example, tending the sick be "labor," or should it be part of non-institutional caring? Is it part of the "family," "household," or "industry"? What about other expressions of mutual or group obligations which lie outside the general division of labor? How will society decide that factory workers building furniture contribute to productive labor, whereas those preparing food, even in a communal kitchen which feeds several hundred people, do not?

Another group of questions cluster around the relationship between individual workplaces and the integrated regional economy. They are raised by Luke's statements about allocating capital and using productivity to "expand income" for a particular workplace (pp. 00-00).

Do particular workplaces have economic interests separate from the community or region as a whole? Do individuals receive benefits from the advances of their own workplace, or only from those of the wider economic unit as a whole?

Workers in the furniture factory, we are told, feel they are "working for themselves." But these words can have different meanings. An individual can feel she is working for herself because the product is something she herself will use, or because she will own the product and be able to use or sell it as she wishes. Similarly, a work group can feel they are working for themselves because collectively they will use the product or will be its possessors. People can feel that they are working for themselves because they are working for a society of which they are full members, so that they will receive a fair share of the benefit of society as a whole—something which might better be expressed as "working for each other." The sense in which one is "working for oneself" varies with the degree of decentralization. A socialist society requires a balance which leaves some degree of initiative in the hands of the communes, while providing social guidelines or limits within which that initiative can be exercised.

What sanctions, if any, are imposed on production communes which do not carry out the regional "production plan"? Are there forms of intervention from "above" when a workplace is not well managed? What happens when production teams do not fulfill their collective responsibility for work to be done?

These questions are brought forcibly to mind by the discussion of

(p.00) a conflict between workers and their management team. The managers propose overtime work, presumably in order to meet production quotas; the workers resist it. Evidently there is a conflict between the immediate interests of workgroups themselves and the responsibility for meeting the production plan. This suggests several questions: Where does the buck stop in responsibility for meeting the plan? Since there is a conflict between the immediate producers and the whole community, is there a place for unions? And should there be a right to strike?

One way to reduce this conflict is to have individuals rotate not only through one workplace but through various different ones in the community. This has the advantage of reducing "special interests" in the fate of particular enterprises, combined with the disadvantage of weakening individual involvement with a particular workplace and work group.

One also wonders whether there are not some skills that are really highly specialized, requiring special talents. Dentistry comes to mind as an example. Does it really make sense to rotate everyone in the health industry through a turn as dentist? Or does it make sense to train five or ten times as many people as dentists as are needed, so that they can work in other occupations as well? These are points at which the elimination of the specialized division of labor becomes extremely costly, and the trade-offs have to be weighed.

This problem is of course especially ticklish in the area of the economic and social expertise needed to deal with the planning process itself.

Work and the Region and Nation

Crucial decisions will concern the guidelines for overall social organization which in the society under consideration are set at a national level. We have little experience to guide us on which matters need to be settled at this level, which can be left to less centralized units. The guidelines described in these letters seem to pertain to the enforcement of certain basic norms of the society, such as the obligation to work and the elimination of racial and sexual inequality. Presumably others would deal with such questions as the reintroduction of wage labor. Still others would have to deal with questions of relations among different regions.

The society described is based on regional economic self-sufficiency. This involves trade-offs that will need to be weighed.

First, there are genuine costs to economic autarky. There are products for which large-scale production does indeed allow savings which would be lost in producing for a purely regional market. These

costs would have to be weighed, not just ignored as a figment of capitalist economic ideology.

Second, there is the question of rich and poor regions. Regional differences exist both because of differentials inherited from capitalist uneven development and from differences in the resource base. A socialist society will have to weigh the value of decentralization against the regional inequality it implies (a conflict which has been very serious in the case of the Yugoslavian experiment with decentralized socialism). Evidently the society described has a strong drive to equalize incomes within each region, but is willing to tolerate substantial differences between regions. Such a policy needs to be considered both in terms of the egalitarian norms of the society and in terms of the impact of the movement of people from poor to rich regions.

Global Issues

Here the same issues arise as at the national level but in a more severe form. The inherited inequalities of developed and underdeveloped countries pose far more serious problems than those among regions within the territory of the United States. Natural resources are very unevenly distributed. The geographical division of labor is far more extreme, and the costs of eliminating it far greater. The movement of people resulting from disparities of wealth is likely to be a far more massive and disruptive phenomenon.

Further, mutual interdependence, as we have seen throughout this discussion, is one of the key factors that encourages people to pursue the general interest rather than special interests. Regional and national autarky reduces the interdependence and strengthens the tendencies toward a selfish consciousness on the part of regions and nations. This tendency needs to be balanced against the advantages of regional and national economic autonomy.

I don't think we can adequately address this question on the basis of the experience and ideas generated in the economically developed countries alone. For that reason I would like to urge that the dialogue which flows from this book include comrades from the Third World who will help us address this question.

THE HUMAN DIMENSION

Values

It is a common criticism of utopian projections that they are based on ideas and values that have arisen within the pre-revolutionary

society, and therefore represent the past rather than the future. One of the best features of the society described in these letters is that it is based on freely developing needs and desires. There seems to be a general understanding that values about such matters as the desired level of consumption, the meaning of work, and the like will evolve over time through dialogue, debate, and experience, rather than being something that can be projected beforehand in "correct" form.

Further, there seems to be an understanding of the need to balance conflicting values. For example, the society described seems to have combined many of the advantages of communes and closed communities with the openness and variety characteristic of cities. The inhabitants seem to have escaped both the isolation and fragmentation of modern urban life and the claustrophobic ingrownness of traditional villages and isolated communes.

Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that this society is based on a high degree of cultural uniformity. There are no groups that represent, for example, strong religious or ideological beliefs that conflict with others: no fundamentalists insisting that Creation Science be taught in schools, no anti-abortionists picketing the clinics. This uniformity allows a high level of social consensus, but it restricts the variety of people one is involved with, and indicates significant limits on what is tolerated from individuals.

Life in general in this society seems very work-centered. Even in their free time individuals engage in activities we would normally think of as work. There is a prevailing mood of seriousness, even of "straightness." If anybody doesn't want to come into work because they really tied one on last night, we don't hear about it.

Such orderliness and diligence may be a cost of running anything as complex as a modern society democratically. But others have envisioned less Apollonian, more Dionysian futures—like Fourier's phalanxes, whose social relations are based on the variety of individual passions. Can a socialist society make room for a mad love affair that violates a contract, or a bereaved person whose only desire is to wander alone in the mountains for a couple of years? Could art be more important, production less? I think the answer to these questions is, again: these are the choices that people in a socialist society will finally have the freedom to make.

Human Relations

Runya emphasizes that "human nature" does change, and I think we can emphatically agree. But I'm not sure that we know enough to predict exactly how it changes, given particular changes in social structure. One of the few things described in these letters that did not

strike me as immediately plausible was the absence of conflict in human relations.

I found this particularly dubious in the case of adolescents. It seems to me that there is a place for individual and collective rejection of the established social order on the part of adolescents, and that it can be a positive developmental force both for the individual and society. The rising generation needs to integrate with society not just on the basis of society as given, but also on its own terms, based on an autonomous decision.

Who would have predicted the massive generational conflict that arose in the U.S. in the 1960s? Certainly nobody did. I think we have to assume that this is one kind of phenomenon which will continue to be uncontrolled in a socialist society, at least for a long time, and one to which it will have to adapt—but which can also serve as a prod to its further development.