

Capitalism and Socialism

Maurice Brinton

December 1968

What is basically wrong with capitalism? Ask a number of socialists and you will get a number of different answers. These will depend on their vision of what socialism might be like and on their ideas as to what political action is all about. Revolutionary libertarian socialists see these things very differently from the trad “left”. This article is not an attempt to counterpoise two conceptions of socialism and political action. It is an attempt to stress a facet of socialist thought that is in danger of being forgotten.

When one scratches beneath the surface, “progressive” capitalists, liberals, Labour reformists, “communist” macro-bureaucrats and Trotskyist mini-bureaucrats all see the evils of capitalism in much the same way. They all see them as primarily economic ills, flowing from a particular pattern of ownership of the means of production. When Khrushchev equated socialism with “more goulash for everyone” he was voicing a widespread view. Innumerable quotations could be found to substantiate this assertion.

If you don’t believe that traditional socialists think in this way, try suggesting to one of them that modern capitalism is beginning to solve some economic problems. He will immediately denounce you as having “given up the struggle for socialism”. He cannot grasp that slumps were a feature of societies that state capitalism had not sufficiently permeated and that they are not intrinsic features of capitalist society. “No economic crisis” is, for the traditional socialist, tantamount to “no crisis”. It is synonymous with “capitalism has solved its problems”. The traditional socialist feels insecure, as a socialist, if told that capitalism can solve this kind of problem, because for him this is *the* problem, par excellence, affecting capitalist society.

The traditional “left” today has a crude vision of man, of his aspirations and his needs, a vision moulded by the rotten society in which we live. It has a narrow concept of class consciousness. For them class consciousness is primarily an awareness of “non-ownership”. They see the “social problem” being solved as the majority of the population gain access to material wealth. All would be well, they say or imply, if as a result of their capture of state power (and of their particular brand of planning) the masses could only be ensured a higher level of consumption. “Socialism” is equated with full bellies. The filling of these bellies is seen as the fundamental task of the socialist revolution.

Intimately related to this concept of man as essentially a producing and consuming machine is the whole traditional “left” critique of laissez-faire capitalism. Many on the “left” continue to think we live under this kind of capitalism and continue to criticize it because it is inefficient (in

the domain of production). The whole of John Strachey's writings prior to World War II were dominated by these conceptions. His *Why You Should Be a Socialist* sold nearly a million copies — and yet the ideas of freedom or self-management do not appear in it, as part of the socialist objective. Many of the leaders of today's "left" graduated at his school, including the so-called revolutionaries. Even the usual vision of communism, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs", usually relates, in the minds of "Marxists", to the division of the cake and not at all to the relations of man with man and between man and his environment.

For the traditional socialist "raising the standard of living" is the main purpose of social change. Capitalism allegedly cannot any longer develop production. (Anyone ever caught in a traffic jam, or in a working class shopping area on a Saturday afternoon, will find this a strange proposition.) It seems to be of secondary importance to this kind of socialist that under modern capitalism people are brutalized at work, manipulated in consumption and in leisure, their intellectual capacity stunted or their taste corrupted by a commercial culture. One must be "soft", it is implied, if one considers the systematic destruction of human beings to be worth a big song and dance. Those who talk of socialist objectives as being *freedom in production* (as well as out of it) are dismissed as "Utopians".

Were it not that misrepresentation is now an established way of life on the "left", it would seem unnecessary to stress that as long as millions of the world's population have insufficient food and clothing, the satisfaction of basic material needs must be an essential part of the socialist programme (and in fact of *any* social programme whatsoever, which does not extol the virtues of poverty.) The point is that by concentrating entirely on this aspect of the critique of capitalism the propaganda of the traditional "left" deprives itself of one of the most telling weapons of socialist criticism, namely an exposure of what capitalism does to people, particularly in countries where basic needs have by and large been met. And whether Guevarist or Maoist friends like it or not, it *is* in these countries, where there is a proletariat, that the socialist future of mankind will be decided.

This particular emphasis in the propaganda of the traditional organizations is not accidental. When they talk of increasing production in order to increase consumption, reformists and bureaucrats of one kind or another feel on fairly safe ground. Despite the nonsense talked by many "Marxists" about "stagnation of the productive forces", bureaucratic capitalism (of both the Eastern and Western types) *can* develop the means of production, has done so and is still doing so on a gigantic scale. It can provide (and historically has provided) a gradual increase in the standard of living — at the cost of intensified exploitation during the working day. It can provide a fairly steady level of employment. So can a well-run gaol. But on the ground of the subjection of man to institutions which are not of his choice, the socialist critiques of capitalism and bureaucratic society retain all their validity. In fact, their validity increases as modern society simultaneously solves the problem of mass poverty *and* becomes increasingly bureaucratic and totalitarian.

It will probably be objected that some offbeat trends in the "Marxist" movement do indulge in this wider kind of critique and in a sense this is true. Yet whatever the institutions criticized, their critique usually hinges, ultimately, on the notion of the unequal distribution of wealth. It consists in variations on the theme of the corrupting influence of money. When they talk for instance of the sexual problem or of the family, they talk of the economic barriers to sexual emancipation, of hunger pushing women to prostitution, of the poor young girl sold to the wealthy man, of the domestic tragedies resulting from poverty. When they denounce what capitalism does to culture they will do so in terms of the obstacles that economic needs puts in the way of talent, or they

will talk of the venality of artists. All this is undoubtedly of great importance. But it is only the surface of the problem. Those socialists who can only speak in these terms see man in much less than his full stature. They see him as the bourgeoisie does, as a consumer (of food, of wealth, of culture, etc.). The essential, however, for man is to fulfil *himself*. Socialism must give man an opportunity to create, not only in the economic field but in all fields of human endeavour. Let the cynics smile and pretend that all this is petty-bourgeois utopianism. “The problem”, Marx said, “is to organize the world in such a manner that man experiences in it the truly human, becomes accustomed to experience himself as a man, to assert his true individuality”.

Conflicts in class society do not simply result from inequalities of distribution, or flow from a given division of the surplus value, itself the result of a given pattern of ownership of the means of production. Exploitation does not *only* result in a limitation of consumption for the many and financial enrichment for the few. This is but one aspect of the problem. Equally important are the attempts by both private and bureaucratic capitalism to limit – and finally to suppress altogether – the *human* role of man in the productive process. Man is increasingly expropriated from the very management of his own acts. He is increasingly alienated during all his activities, whether individual or collective. By subjecting man to the machine – and through the machine to an abstract and hostile will – class society deprives man of the real purpose of human endeavour, which is the constant, conscious transformation of the world around him. That men resist this process (and that their resistance implicitly raises the question of self-management) is as much a driving force in the class struggle as the conflict over the distribution of the surplus. Marx doubtless had these ideas in mind when he wrote that the proletariat “regards its independence and sense of personal dignity as more essential than its daily bread”.

Class society profoundly inhibits the natural tendency of man to fulfil himself in the objects of his activity. In every country of the world this state of affairs is experienced day after day by the working class as an absolute misfortune, as a permanent mutilation. It results in a constant struggle at the most fundamental level of production: that of conscious, willing participation. The producers utterly reject (and quite rightly so) a system of production which is imposed upon them from above and in which they are mere cogs. Their inventiveness, their creative ability, their ingenuity, their initiative may be shown in their own lives, but are certainly not shown in production. In the factory these aptitudes may be used, but to quite different and “non-productive” ends! They manifest themselves in a resistance to production. This results in a constant and fantastic waste compared with which the wastage resulting from capitalist crises or capitalist wars is really quite trivial!

Alienation in capitalist society is not simply economic. It manifests itself in many other ways. The conflict in production does not “create” or “determine” secondary conflicts in other fields. Class domination manifests itself in all fields, at one and the same time. Its effects could not otherwise be understood. Exploitation, for instance, can only occur if the producers are expropriated from the management of production. But this presupposes that they are partly expropriated at least from the capacities of management – in other words from culture. And this cultural expropriation in turn reinforces those in command of the productive machine. Similarly a society in which relations between people are based on domination will maintain authoritarian attitudes in relation to sex and to education, attitudes creating deep inhibitions, frustrations and much unhappiness. The conflicts engendered by class society take place in every one of us. A social structure containing deep antagonisms reproduces these antagonisms in variable degrees in each of the individuals comprising it.

There is a profound dialectical interrelationship between the social structure of a society and the attitudes and behaviour of its members. “The dominant ideas of each epoch are the ideas of its ruling class”, whatever modern sociologists may think. Class society can only exist to the extent that it succeeds in imposing a widespread acceptance of its norms. From his earliest days man is subjected to constant pressures designed to mould his views in relation to work, to culture, to leisure, to thought itself. These pressures tend to deprive him of the natural enjoyment of his activity and even to make him accept this deprivation as something intrinsically good. In the past this job was assisted by religion. Today the same role is played by “socialist” and “communist” ideologies. But man is not infinitely malleable. This is why the bureaucratic project will come unstuck. Its objectives are in conflict with fundamental human aspirations.

We mention all this only to underline the essential identity of relations of domination — whether they manifest themselves in the capitalist factory, in the patriarchal family, in the authoritarian upbringing of children or in “aristocratic” cultural traditions. We also mention these facts to show that *the socialist revolution will have to take all these fields within its compass, and immediately, not in some far distant future.* The revolution must of course start with the overthrow of the exploiting class and with the institution of workers’ management of production. But it will immediately have to tackle the reconstruction of social life in *all* its aspects. If it does not, it will surely die.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Maurice Brinton
Capitalism and Socialism
December 1968

www.marxists.org
Published in *Solidarity*, V, 6

theanarchistlibrary.org