

# **Were We Wrong?**

Murray Bookchin

1985

# Contents

<b>The Failures of the Classical Analysis</b> . . . . .	3
<b>The Failure of Classical Historiography</b> . . . . .	6
<b>Toward a New Radical Agenda</b> . . . . .	12

Is it possible that the Left has been wrong about capitalist development and revolutionary change? Is it possible that 20<sup>th</sup>-century capitalism is not “moribund;” that the Russian Revolution did not usher in an “era of wars and revolutions,” as predicted by Lenin; that capitalism does not unfold according to an “immanent” dialectic in which lie the “seeds” of its own destruction? Could it be that we are in a ceaseless “ascending phase” of capitalism?

We grasp at straws — Hungary in 1956, Paris in 1968, Czechoslovakia in 1969, Poland in the early 1980s — for evidence of a revolutionary proletariat without seeing the tragic marginality of these events. We turn to China, Cuba, Southeast Asia, Portugal, and Nicaragua for evidence of a “revolutionary era” or to the Korean and Vietnamese conflicts for evidence of a “war-ridden era” without seeing their nationalist limitations. We try to acknowledge how ambiguous they are in relation to the larger fact of a greatly expanded capitalism, the extent to which the marketplace has deepened its reach into the most intimate aspects of social life, the striking stability of the system as a whole, its chilling technological sophistication that has made meaningless all images of insurrectionary revolutions in the major centers of capitalism.

Nor can we continue to use “betrayals” to explain the failures of the past four generations. Such a consistent pattern of treachery suggests an internal weakness in the traditional socialist “perspective” of capitalism and revolution that raises more questions than it answers. The socialist project is fragile indeed if betrayal can occur so easily and if “success” yields bureaucratic traits so constrictive and reactionary that history is the better for its failures. The Russian Revolution was a catastrophe whose shadow has cast the entire century into darkness, and lives in our dreams more as a nightmare than a vision of hope.

The answers are not to be found in quietism and defeat. It is not defeatist to acknowledge that our *expectations* were unwarranted and the analyses that nourished them were equally faulty. Nor is accommodation possible if capitalism remains irrational to the core; that it has *always* been so (Marx’s arguments about its “progressive role” to the contrary notwithstanding); and that it has *always* stood at odds with an abiding potential for freedom and ecological balance. But before that potential can be seen and a relevant practice developed from efforts to realize it, we must clear away the ideological fog that obscures our thinking. This fog arises from a conjuncture of forces that has been seriously misjudged by radicals for more than a century and from a misreading of phenomena that span the last four centuries.

## **The Failures of the Classical Analysis**

Whether one chooses to call capitalism “progressive” and “permanently revolutionary,” to use Marx’s words, or a “historically necessary evil,” to use Bakunin’s in regard to the state, the fact remains that WWI opened an entirely new era in radical social theory. The terrible blood-letting of the war posed serious challenges to the exuberant belief in progress that the previous century associated with the new social order. At the same time the revolutionary upheavals of the 1917–23 period awakened new hopes about the imminent likelihood of a rational society — of socialism and human emancipation. The universalism and humanism of the socialist project as it was formulated at that time has no equal in our own. Clearly, it was agreed, capitalism had ceased to be “progressive” or “historically necessary” irrespective of whether it was “evil” or not. If it had an “ascending phase” characterized by dramatic advances in technology and the demys-

tification of all traditional human bonds, and between humanity and nature, it had definitely not entered in a “descending phase” that guaranteed its self-extinction.

The socialist project was very specific about the shift in the cycle of capitalist development. In its “ascending phase,” capitalism had presumably established the technical preconditions for socialism. It seemed to foster internationalism by secularizing all human bonds and experiences, making giant strides in cultural and political development, expanding human productivity and needs, rationalizing experience as well as production — and, above all, creating a special class, the proletariat, whose interests and afflictions inexorably drove it toward the abolition of the wage system, capitalism, and class society as such. Even if it was reasonable to suppose that without class consciousness the proletariat could no more become a “hegemonic class” than the most quietistic peasantry, socialist theorists emphasized that “objective events” — and in Lenin’s view, a party of conscious revolutionaries — would provide the self-reflexivity that could have made a successful proletarian revolution possible.

The outbreak of WWII provided conclusive evidence of the failure of this entrenched analysis. For nearly ten years prior to the war, world capitalism had reached an unprecedented period of stagnation and decline. The economy was frozen in crises that appeared to be chronic and intractable. Living standards, employment, hopes for recovery, and a belief in the legitimacy the social order had ebbed to an all-time low by comparison with the pre-WWI era. Following the 1929 financial collapse, the proletariat emerged almost explosively as a social force. Although largely defensive, workers’ insurrections led by socialists flared up in Austria and Spain (1934); general strikes swept France, marked by the raising of red flags over factories (1935); plant occupations and combative struggles with police in the U.S. created an illusion of a near-insurrectionary crisis, buttressed by agrarian unrest in which armed farmers closed down auctions and obstructed the movement of produce during farmers’ strikes with road barricades. Despite revealing failures, this movement could claim definite if illusory successes: the election of the Popular Front in France and Spain; the recognition of industrial unions in the U.S.; and, finally, the short-lived achievements of the Spanish Revolution in 1936–37 which set an unprecedented example of workers’ and peasants’ self-management. Rarely had an insurgent mass movement achieved such ongoing persistence and militancy. Indeed, fascism seemed not only like an expression of a general crisis in the capitalist social order that called for a vigorous imposition of totalitarian controls but also like a defensive reaction by a traditional bourgeoisie to a growing and increasingly menacing labor movement whose militancy appeared to verge on outright social revolution.

Capitalism in the 1930s also appeared to be a “historical materialist” textbook example of a social order that had outlived its legitimacy. Not only was the decade stagnant economically and ravaged by class conflict; it was technologically stagnant as well. Judging from the literature of the times, a convincing case could be made for Marx’s notion that “the material forces of production” had “come into conflict with the existing relations of production.” Technology was bound by sharp corporate and monopolistic constraints that foreclosed innovation. Capitalism, it seemed, could no longer perform its “historically assigned” function of advancing the “material preconditions” for freedom; indeed, it seemed to block their development. A socialist revolution was needed, presumably, to bring society back into history, that is, to restore the momentum of technological advances which the bourgeois social order could no longer sustain.

Finally the outbreak of WWII was seen as the culmination of the “chronic crisis of capitalism” — its climax and literally the battleground for a resolution of the so-called “social question.” The mass defection of leftist liberals to the Allied military cause did not induce despair among the

already contracting radical movements of the 1940s. WWII, it was argued by traditional Marxists, was merely a continuation of WWI — an imperialist adventure that would reopen all the wounds that caused its predecessor to end in social revolution. Indeed, this second war was now visualized as a more short-lived conflict. The proletarian masses of the 1940s, presumably more educated by their experiences during the interwar period of capitalist decay, social conflict, revolutions, the usual diet of “betrayals” and “treachery” served up by social democracy and Stalinism, and an expanded sense of class solidarity and internationalism, would act to change society with greater determination than the previous generation. Given a reasonable amount of time, the contending imperialist blocs in the world conflict would reveal their “bankruptcy” and a subterranean labor movement, even in fascist Germany (to some, *especially* in fascist Germany) would pick up the dangling threads of 1917–18 and soon terminate the war in social revolution.

It is difficult to convey how tenaciously this scenario was held by the interwar generation of radicals. Nearly all of the radical theorizing of a century fed into these visions of social change and the detailed sequence of forecasts that the revolutionary socialist movement projected for the future in 1940 and well into the war itself. By the same token, any doubts about this analysis and its outcome yielded reactions that were equally far-reaching. Trotsky, more than any of the Bolsheviks, retained the classical perspective of the era, indeed, of the traditional labor movement itself. Shortly before his death he claimed that the war advanced very compelling challenges to the radical tradition. After expressing the usual ritualistic confidence in the above scenario and the certainties of its outcome, he turned to the implications of an alternative outcome. If capitalism emerged from the war intact, he warned, the revolutionary movement would have to re-examine its most fundamental premises. His murder in 1940 foreclosed the possibility of such a re-evaluation by his followers. But his words doggedly haunt the entire revolutionary project as it developed from the days of the earliest workers’ insurrections. Trotsky’s chilling confrontation with the project’s failure enabled him to see WWII as a test of a traditional Marxist and Leninist view of the entire history of capitalist development.

WWII did not end early. It lasted for nearly six years. It did not terminate in revolutions. The German workers fought to the very doors of Hitler’s bunker in Berlin without even a significant mutiny. Far from exhibiting any significant evidence of class solidarity and internationalism, the war was fought out on largely nationalist terms and for ideals redolent of 18<sup>th</sup>-century “patriotism,” often descending to a savage irredentism and even racism, without the rationalist and utopian canons of the Enlightenment.

What is even more remarkable: capitalism emerged from WWII in a *stronger* position than in past generations. Although the war devoured between 40 and 60 million lives, the social order that claimed this unprecedented toll was never seriously questioned. With the exception of Russia and Spain, countries whose “proletariat” largely consisted of peasants in overalls, socialism and anarchism had failed to orient the European proletariat toward social revolution. In the 50 years that followed the last of the workers’ upsurges, there is no evidence that the long experience of proletarian socialism has fostered any advance in human freedom. Indeed, in the name of socialism, totalitarian states today rule an immense portion of the world with a ruthlessness that is as dismal as that of their antecedents.

Technological innovation, in turn, acquired a momentum that has shattered every constraint — moral as well as economic — that society could raise against its elevation to pre-eminence in the human mind. To point to a ripening of the material conditions for socialism, communism, or anarchism as a justification for this breakthrough verges on black humor. A strong case can

be made today for Adorno's Luddism in *Minima Moralia* — indeed, perhaps a stronger one than what he proposed. Never before has technological innovation emerged so much as a force in its own right to arrest any trend toward the realization of the “true society.” The sophistication of today's weaponry reduces insurrectionary modes of social change to romanticism while hopes for the hegemony of the proletariat are little more than mere nostalgia. But what today haunts proletarian socialism even more than the end of the barricade as anything other than a symbol is the numerical decline of the industrial proletariat itself — the change in the very *personality* of what was once called wage labor. This proletariat now faces near-extinction by cybernation, a reality that is perhaps more persuasive testimony to the archaic character of classical socialism and anarchosyndicalism than the myth that this class will play a central role in social change. Long gone are the days when technology could be seen as a force promoting socialism. Technological innovation has taken on a life of its own and can be adduced not only as a means of economic and political regulation but as a causal factor in ecological breakdown. It is forming a history that can be written in large part autonomously: as the story of an avalanche of devices that make the citizen powerless, smother individual expression, and submerge personal creativity. Capitalism has clearly stabilized itself, assuming that it was ever unstable. And it has done so by establishing itself as a social given that is now as unquestioned as feudalism was in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. That is to say, capitalism now enjoys a psychological validity that renders its functions as free from challenges, indeed, consciousness, as the operations of the autonomic nervous system. The failure of the classical analysis is just as complete and just as disturbing, for it too has had a significant role in legitimating capitalism by its own interpretation of capitalism's origins and evolution.

## The Failure of Classical Historiography

The contribution of the classical analysis to the legitimation of capitalism is most evident in the way socialism has assumed the institutional forms of recent capitalism. A disquieting similarity exists between the centralization of the state under capitalism and classical socialist goals. This goes back to Marx's *Capital* itself, which notwithstanding its brilliant analysis of the commodity, projects capitalist development into a phase that is so akin to its author's conception of socialism that the work ceases to be *authentically* critical in the sense of providing a point of departure for social liberation. To the contrary: the work enters into unknowing complicity with the development of capitalism toward its still unknown “maturation.” It is not Marx's analysis that takes the commodity in hand but rather the commodity that takes possession of Marx's analysis and subtly carries it into implied realms that he could never have anticipated or regarded as desirable.

But the real failure of “historical materialism” is a much deeper one. Marx's “class analysis,” a still active dimension of his theoretical corpus, raises problems that have not been adequately dealt with by most of his acolytes. His “class analysis” is structured around the fundamental notion that the “domination of nature” cannot be achieved without the “domination of man by man,” an implied view of nature whose practical implications have profoundly shaped the classical tradition.

Classes in Marx's larger social views were indispensable for separating humanity from “savagery,” for bringing it into history and forming the material preconditions for liberation — liberation not only from the domination of man by man but from the domination of nature that made

human domination “historically necessary.” Within this convoluted dialectic, classical socialism remained blind to ecological and gender problems, both of which are linked not only to the emergence of classes and exploitation, but are rooted even more fundamentally in the emergence of hierarchy and domination. Accordingly, attempts to formulate a socialist ecology and feminism to keep pace with the social movements of our day tend to be mere contrivances. Although sectarian socialists criticize these movements for lacking a class analysis, we are still flooded with gleanings from Marx on ecology and women that verge on caricature. Marx’s class analysis reflects a very Victorian, indeed, bourgeois, marketplace notion of nature as a realm of domination, blindness, rivalry, and scarce resources that once defined every major discipline of the time from economics to psychology. The more contemporary ecological image of nature, particularly of ecosystems, as nonhierarchical, self-formative, mutualistic, and fecund has eluded the Marxian outlook with the result that American socialists today are more comfortable with the journalism of Andre Gorz, for whom “ecological” problems arise from the “decline in the rate of profit” than they are with more incisive works of ecophilosophy that preceded his *Ecology as Politics*.

This problem goes far beyond that of the weight that 19<sup>th</sup>-century notions impose on the classical socialist analysis. Nor can it be seen only as the result of a patchwork refurbishing of Marxism with concepts that are alien to its core ideas. Rather, what is most relevant here is the mischief Marx’s “class analysis” has wrought in formulating a fresh interpretation of the capitalist development and the politics needed to deal with it. We are obliged to ask whether radical theory is well served by an image of social development based primarily on conflicting economic interests premised on the ownership or control of property. As an alternative to this, we might consider the possibility that capitalism itself represents an *exception* to a more widespread social development based on status and the ways in which the socialization process and society as a whole define the individual’s position in the human community and maintain the individual’s place in it.

Has capitalism, in fact, really revealed the material self-interest that has presumably guided society under the mask of ideology for thousands of years, as Marx claims, or has it rather *created* that interest in a basically different social dispensation that replaced status arrangements with classes? As Karl Polanyi observes, man “does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets.” Thus, the core for social analysis is the paramount social tie for which economic relations are merely a highly variable means rather than the “basis” for social interaction. To go beyond Polanyi’s observation, we can see that his social tie may follow a libertarian pathway or an authoritarian one. Indeed, once early egalitarian societies began to break down, the libertarian pathway, interlaced with the authoritarian one, rises from subterranean depths in periods of social upheaval and then submerges in eras of social stability.

The notion that precapitalist society was primarily a society of orders, not simply of classes, is hardly new, but its implications as well as its premises have yet to be fully explored. One’s community and the place one occupies in it is one of the most *human* attributes we possess. It is also the way in which we situate ourselves throughout our lives, the way in which familial care is projected beyond the family into the larger context of human relations. Thus, nearly all precapitalist societies projected family and kinship relations onto social life. Despite the growth of a purely juridical concept of citizenship and a rationalist concept of politics, lineage retained enormous importance in secular communities. Monarchies dealt with the territories under their control more as patrimonies than as nations or cultures, and it was by these biosocial norms

that people “ordered” their economic lives into social *orders*, not according to economic elements which would have structured them as classes.

We must keep this distinction between a society of orders and a society of classes clearly in mind, inasmuch as it has important political and practical implications. A class analysis based exclusively on economic interests misleads history and misdirects practice. Social distortions and regressions can no longer be explained primarily by property relations, nor can they be rectified by socio-economic measures alone, such as nationalization, collectivization, or “workplace democracy.” For what explodes all these proffered solutions to the tainted nature of modern society is the swollen legacy of command and obedience relations — in a word, hierarchy as the more basic substrate of all class relations.

To develop more fully the contrast between status societies and class societies, it is necessary to reject altogether the idea that capitalism as a society of classes could have emerged organically within the “womb” of feudalism, a society of orders. Capitalism’s uniqueness must be seen in the light that traditional society as a whole — oriented around family and status — sheds upon it. No precapitalist world was equipped to deal with the formidable social and cultural irresponsibility that an uncontrolled market economy would foster. One does not have to accept the canons of *laissez-faire* to recognize that a market lacking any ethical, cultural, and institutional constraints would have horrified people even in the commercial world of the Renaissance, with its nuanced standards for commerce. The identification of the market with capitalism, in fact, results only from a highly specious reworking of historical fact. Markets existed for ages in many different forms, but they were carefully integrated into larger, more demanding, and socially more legitimate communities that structured life around orders, largely united by kinship and craft ties. These elements of early tribalism and village societies never disappeared completely from the precapitalist world. It was precisely capitalism, the uncontrolled market, that became society, or, more precisely, began to eat away at society as a cancer, a malignancy that threatened the very existence of the social bond itself. It is only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in post-WWII America that capitalism emerged from its position as a predominant force in society to become a substitute for society, corroding all familial and kinship ties — and reducing the population as a whole to buyers and sellers in a universal, ever-expanding marketplace.

Capitalism, *always a dormant system* in the larger context of precapitalist social orders, essentially burst upon the world in a period of sweeping social decline. The feudal system of orders which the absolutist monarchies of Europe seemingly held together had fallen into complete decay. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Europe existed in what was little more than a social vacuum within which capitalism could grow and ultimately flourish, a period in which there was a general erosion of *all* mores, not least of which were traditions that inhibited the growth and authority of the burgher strata itself. Capitalism began to emerge as a predominant economy feeding on the decomposing corpses of all traditional status-oriented societies. It pandered to the vices of; a decadent nobility, to the profligacy of a malignant court, to the indulgent pretensions of the *nouveau riches* and it battered on the misery of abandoned masses — peasants, laborers, guildsmen, and lumpenproletarians — that feudalism had cast aside to fend for themselves with the decline of the patronal system and its traditional nexus of rights and duties. The good “burghers” of the declining feudal world and the era of absolutism — the so-called “nascent bourgeoisie” — were no less status-oriented and later no less royalist than the “classes” they were supposed to oppose and displace. There is nothing to show that these nascent bourgeois were capitalist in

any unique sense other than their desire to accumulate capital with a view toward buying titles that would make them part of the nobility or acquire land that would validate their noble status.

Nor is there much evidence that the nascent bourgeois had political aspirations that “historically” pitted them against the traditional status structures of the *ancien regime*. Quite to the contrary: their hostility was mainly directed against the arrogance of the nobility, against its exclusively, not against the principle of ennoblement and oligarchy as such. Nor did the bourgeoisie exhibit any republican, much less democratic, proclivities. Their detestation of the masses was no less savage, indeed often more so, than that of the nobility, which often included enlightened, urban individuals riddled by a sense of guilt over their wealth and prerogatives. England, not America, was the political ideal of the French bourgeoisie — a constitutional monarchy structured around a collaborative aristocracy joined with a socially mobile commercial and industrial middle class. Republicanism was almost universally regarded by the Enlightenment as the door to political license and democracy was simply equated with “anarchy,” a word that speckled the vocabulary of the revolutionary politicians throughout the 1790s.

Radical historians’ emphasis on Paris during the French Revolution makes it difficult to bring the revolution into a clear perspective. Paris was the administrative center of the monarchy and the urban playground of the French aristocracy, a city that harbored thriving financial establishments that pandered to the court and family-owned workshops given over to the production of luxury goods. The real centers of French bourgeois life, particularly the textile industry around which the industrial revolution was to develop, were cities like Lyons and Amiens, which, taken together with commercial centers like Bordeaux and major seaports like Marseilles and Toulon, more accurately reflected the bourgeois spirit of the revolutionary period than Paris, a magnet for the more radical elements of the intelligentsia and the shabby quarters and decaying slums occupied by a huge petit bourgeoisie composed of professionals, shopkeepers, printers, artisans, and a socially amorphous mass of day laborers and lumpenproletarians, the well-known *sans culottes*.

All of these cities were bitterly anti-Jacobin and often militantly royalist. The suppression of the Lyons *sans-culottes* in May, 1793, was the work, in Lefebvre’s words, of “the bourgeoisie who had remained monarchist” as well as partisans of the old order from other strata of the population. “Amiens never become solidly republican,” notes Lynn Hart in her book on the political culture of the revolution. In fact, as late as 1799, five years after the counterrevolutionary Thermidorians had dispatched Robespierre and the Jacobins, the city was torn by anti-conscription riots that resounded with such denunciations as “Down with the Jacobins! Long live the King! Long live Louis XVIII!” Even the stolid bourgeois Thermidoreans found Amiens an embarrassment. The Girondist seaports and commercial towns of Marseilles and Toulon repressed the Jacobins (by no means the most radical faction in the revolution) with the same vigor that Paris repressed the Girondists. Indeed, Toulon had become so royalist by 1793 that that city delivered itself over to the English rather than submit to the authority of revolutionary Paris.

The image of the French or, for that matter, of the English or American revolutions as “bourgeois” is a simplistic projection of present-day ideological biases onto the past.<sup>1</sup> It is not helpful

---

<sup>1</sup> Perez Zagorin scornfully deflates Eric Hobsbawm’s depiction of the English Revolution as a “bourgeois revolution” resulting from a chronic crisis within feudalism that forms the historical materialist correlate of the “chronic crisis” within capitalism. What is wrong with Hobsbawm’s thesis, Zagorin says, “is the absence of evidence that could demonstrate the actuality of a general crisis in terms described.” The details of Zagorin’s criticism are too numerous to repeat here. Nor is it possible here to deal with the liberties Hobsbawm takes in dealing with precapitalist movements,

simply to note that the bourgeoisie benefited in the long run from these revolutions. This tells us very little about the forces, motives, and ideals of the revolutionary era — an era opened by English Puritans in the 1640s and brought to a close by Spanish anarchosyndicalists in the 1930s. English yeomen, American farmers, and, most notably, French peasants were the immediate beneficiaries of these revolutions no less than the early bourgeoisie. Doubtless, the bourgeoisie ultimately became the *greatest beneficiary* of the revolutions, but complete supremacy came to it very unevenly over the course of time and in a very mixed form. The Jeffersonian “Revolution of 1800” was largely a political victory of U.S. agrarian strata: the American bourgeoisie’s interests were more directly tied to Hamilton’s self-styled “Federalist Party” than Jefferson’s Republican Party, and political power in America as in England — was held by the gentry, occasionally in direct conflict with the financiers, merchants, and industrialists who were not to gain complete control of the republic until the Reconstruction Era. To say, as Hunt does, that the French Revolution placed the bourgeoisie in the political saddle because the revolutionary officials... were either merchants with capital, professionals with skills, artisans with their own shops, or, more rarely, peasants with land” is to make a grab-bag of the word “bourgeois” — indeed, to use the word more in a feudal sense as burghers than a modern sense, as capitalists. This kind of “bourgeoisie” was in no sense a stable class but a *pot pourri* of highly disparate strata that was unified more by what it was not — namely, nobles and priests than what it seemed to be. It was simply the Third Estate. To add, as Hunt does, that it was “anti-feudal, anti-aristocrat, and anti-absolutists” is to raise the question of what constitutes an authentic bourgeoisie. Presumably, not the industrialists of Amiens and the merchants of Toulon — if Hunt is correct. Least of all the Parisian Thermidorians who so willingly turned the French state over to Napoleon who, in Lefebvre’s own words, became reconciled with the church, pardoned the emigres, and took into his service all of those — aristocrats and bourgeoisie, royalists and republicans — who were willing to support him.”

The fact is that radical theoreticians decided to designate the revolutions of the Enlightenment as bourgeois and to deal with monarchial absolutism as preparatory for the emergence of a predetermined capitalism. Perry Anderson was to treat absolutism as a basically feudal phenomenon to support a very ill-founded theory of the stages of history. This is teleology with a vengeance a teleology that denies any spontaneity to history by nailing it to the hard and splintered cross of necessity. That history can have meaning and direction is vulgarized into a concept of historical natural law, operating in human affairs with the grim causality that is imputed to its operation in socially conditioned images of nature. Capitalism, in effect, ceases to be a result of a social process and turns into its very substance. The fact that capitalism is the most *asocial* and malignant system to emerge in human experience is in great part the result of *decay* in history rather than a *product* of the elaboration of world history. It is a “social order” that flourishes cancerously on the corpses of traditional societies. Today, the interaction between the traditional centers of capitalism and the noncapitalist world differs significantly from earlier periods, when the contact between the two was more equitable. Like a metastatic cell, the commodity has done its work and the doors of traditional societies have been flung wide open to unrestricted exploitation.

This lengthy discussion of the so-called bourgeois revolutions, capitalist development, and the distinction between status and class societies has been guided not by any abstract concern for the

---

notably his atrocious treatment of Spanish anarchosyndicalism in *Primitive Rebels*. Cf. Perez Zagorin, *Rebels and Rulers, 1500–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) and my *The Spanish Anarchists* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

historical record but by explicitly political reasons. Regarding the English, American, and French revolutions as “bourgeois” has been very harmful politically, resulting in a highly *economistic* exploration of the revolutionary era. George Rude, to take a case in point, has so closely correlated fluctuations of the price of bread with crowd behavior in the French Revolution that the *sans culottes* emerge more as stomachs than as vital, politically concerned human beings. Charles Beard’s well-intentioned treatment of the American Revolution is so biased by a preoccupation with class interest that his insightful correction of purely ideological historical accounts suffers heavily from a crude economic determinism. Such swings of the pendulum may be necessary to correct exaggerations of both accounts — a starry-eyed idealism at one extreme and crude self-interest at the other — but they have gone too far. That men like the English Leveller, John Lilburne, or the American yeoman radical, Dan Shays, were concerned with larger social issues than the cost of bread or farm foreclosures tends to be lost in a welter of statistical data aimed at proving the predominance of material interests over ideological and cultural ones. David P. Szatmar’s *Shays’ Rebellion* points out that Shays and the yeomen who followed him into insurrection in 1787 rose against the newly founded U.S. to preserve a complex *way of life*, not merely to cow the Boston merchants who threatened to dispossess them of their lands.

The sinister side of radical historiography has been explored repeatedly. If history uses humanity to fulfill ends of its own, then suffering, cruelty, and despotism can be justified in the name of progress and ultimately freedom. Ideology, ethics, culture, politics — and, of course, leaders — are moved to act beyond their own understanding of events by Hegel’s “cunning of reason. Lenin, by superadding the party and its political consciousness to the objective movement of history — a history that has a foresight, lawfulness, and goal of its own — did not deny this Hegelian concept of Spirit in history. He merely bureaucratized Spirit with an apparatus of self-anointed professional revolutionaries who consciously executed the designs of history in the ultimate interests of the unknowing masses. The result of this authoritarian logic was the usurpation of the Russian Revolution by a party that professed to represent the objective interests of the proletariat often in the very course of suppressing the proletariat itself.

We have paid for this “materialism” by suffocating every ethical and humanist dimension in history. We have tallied up the statistics for economic growth and productivity in “socialist societies” in juxtaposition with the statistics for mass murder and the formation of entire populations of slave laborers to render our ultimate verdict on the “success” or “failure” of these seemingly “socialist” institutions. Freedom plays no role whatever in this tally. More than any modern ideology other than fascism, socialism has traded off liberty for “distributive justice” — an exchange that has poisoned its very image of everything human, turning society itself into a mere machine for the conquest of nature. What is most disconcerting today is the interpretation and the politics stemming from this disastrous vision of history. If the English, American, and French revolutions are not bourgeois revolutions, what are they? If the classical revolutionary era has come to an end, what kind of politics follows from this? Finally, if the proletariat is not a revolutionary class, what is the “historical subject” that will transform a hierarchical, and exploitative society into one that is egalitarian, classless, and free?

## Toward a New Radical Agenda

Capitalism is a system that is *permanently* counter-revolutionary — Marx’s views to the contrary notwithstanding. Now here did it rescue or advance the human spirit of cooperation that existed in the most despotic societies and the most parochial communities of the past; at no time did its sense of charity extend beyond a utilitarian manipulation of the masses. Few of its material benefits, technical advances, or wealth were used to better the human condition. Capitalism was a blight on society from the moment it began to rise. Almost every attempt to arrest the development of capitalism early on was more progressive than the progressive role imputed to the bourgeois mode of production. The Luddites were essentially right. They were not reactionary when they tried to halt the rapacious advance of the Industrial Revolution. So too were the Critical-Utopian socialists and communists, the Proudhonians and Fourierists on whom Marx and Engels heaped their scorn in the *Communist Manifesto*. Even the English gentry who wrote the Speenham land Law of 1795 were right, however self-serving their motives, when they tried to prevent the peasantry from being delivered wholesale over to the wage system. And the Russian populists were right when they tried to rescue the village, particularly its mutualistic features, from the travail of capitalist industrialism.

The list is almost endless. In large part, it consists of the hidden libertarian tendency in history that tried to provide an alternative to Speenham land as well as the wage system, to backbreaking manual labor as well as soul-corroding factory work, to parochialism as well as the world market system. To think that present-day urban misery is the only alternative to rural poverty is to fall into a trap that so paralyzes creative thought and practice that radical theory can no longer distinguish what is from what could be. Movements did exist that opposed status societies as well as class societies, feudalism as well as capitalism, technological stagnation as well as mindless technological innovation. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one thinks of Russia and Spain, the populists and the anarchists, as striking examples of highly moral social movements that tried to bypass capitalist development without acceding to the oppressive features of autocratic and quasi-feudal societies. The “third way” these movements offered was simply suppressed — not only by the state (Stalinist and fascist) but by radical historians themselves, whose history of the Left was often highly selective and biased toward the conventional socialism of our time.

In any case, this much is clear: We must acknowledge the *permanent*, retrogressive nature of capitalism *from its very inception*. We must see it as a saprophytic system that is by definition asocial, and recognize it as a mechanism that will die on its own only like a cancer that destroys its host. We have to understand that the economic interpretation of history and society is the extension of the bourgeois spirit into the totality of the human condition. Capitalism will not decay. It will either destroy society as we have known it, and possibly much of the biosphere along with it, or it will be corroded, weakened, and hollowed out by libertarian traditions. It would be difficult to explain why the “Fourth World” has offered such massive resistance to the “blessings” of industrialism unless we invoke the power of strong traditions, entrenched lifeways, deeply held values, beliefs and customs. It would be difficult to explain why the Barcelona proletarian-peasants burned money and disdained every lure of opulence after the city fell into their hands without invoking the *moral* power of their libertarian beliefs — a sensibility that was to often stand in sharp contrast to the pragmatic mentality of their leaders.

The only revolutionary era on which we can premise any future for radical change is the one that lies behind us. No cycle of socialist or anarchist revolution will follow the so-called

“bourgeois” cycle initiated some three centuries ago. The arsenal of our time has developed so far beyond the classical insurrectionary models on which traditional radical theory has been fixated as to make unthinkable the recurrence of another Spain or Russia. Indeed, no creative discussion of a radical politics can even begin without acknowledging the change this simple technical fact has introduced into the “art of insurrection” — to use Trotsky’s words.

By the same token, the only agent on which we can premise future radical change emerges from the melding of traditional groups into a public sphere, a body politic, a community imbued with a sense of cultural and spiritual continuity and renewal. This community, however, is constituted only in the ever-present act of an ever-dynamic effort of public and self-assertion that yields a sharp sense of selfhood. Collectivity thus melds with individuality to produce rounded human beings in a rounded society. Direct action assumes the form of direct democracy: the participatory forms of freedom that rest on face-to-face assemblies, rotation of public functions, and, where possible, consensus.

Such a community must presume that solidarity outweighs status or class interests, that its way of life can absorb the centrifugal interests that separate human from human, that a shared ethics imparts the consciousness, conscience, and sympathy needed to override a sense of selfhood that risks degenerating into selfishness and that preoccupation with private concerns so characteristic of the contemporary therapeutic age. No proletariat has ever fit these standards of social and political propriety as a class phenomenon. Indeed, class is so integrally tied up with interest that it precludes the ability to voice broadly human concerns. Hence, no possibility ever existed that the proletariat, particularly the hereditary one that had a long tradition of class being behind it, could ever speak for the general interest of society. It is noteworthy that the individual, who is so readily conglomerated into a class existence by radical historiography, tends to behave with greater decency than the mass. The denial of the individual’s role in history has had the sinister effect of denying the moral integrity of the person in contrast to the role assigned to masses as forces in history and to demolish the only arm or people have against the degrading effects of “civilization” — the personal ethics, simple etiquette, psychological uniqueness, and human intimacy of care and understanding that can challenge monstrous excesses with personal, day-to-day resistance and delegitimation.

This brings us back to what was *not* bourgeois in the so-called bourgeois revolutions — the utopian dimension of human liberty, equality, and fraternity that panicked the real bourgeois into Hamilton’s royalist conspiracies in America and, finally, the dissolution of the republic into Napoleonic autocracy in France. The American yeomanry and the Parisian *sans culottes* did not rise against their rulers because they were interested in freeing trade or fostering capital accumulation. They rose to defend their own conception of a distinctly ethical ideal: freedom from arbitrary authority, an intensely communal world that fostered intercourse among their people, humaneness in dealing with individuals irrespective of status and wealth, in fact, a return to the regulation of commerce (as evidenced by the *sans-culottes* demands for price controls and Shays’ belief in the yeomanry’s right to land irrespective of legal entailments). By all standards of historical materialism, they were reactionaries who believed in a moral economy and tried to hang onto traditional rights and duties as they construed them. To revolt meant literally to restore ancient liberties, communal lifeways, and responsibilities. Insofar as these revolutions invariably went beyond the privileged institutions of English constitutionalism, they were no more bourgeois than the Bolshevik take-over was proletarian. They were first and foremost republican or democratic revolutions that were foisted on the bourgeoisie — a class that vigorously resisted

their libertarian features, The bourgeoisie did not make these revolutions; it was saddled with them two centuries ago.

The tension between the revolutionary tradition to which even the bourgeoisie must make its obeisances and the corporate reality that stands at odds with it constitutes the greatest single obstacle to the unrestrained supremacy of capital. Like the *estates generale* that blocked the French monarchy in 1789, the bourgeoisie carries the heritage of its beginnings on its shoulders like a lead weight. More importantly, this alien heritage is also the mystique that lends moral legitimacy to the bourgeoisie's otherwise colorless and prosaic reality. The aversion of Americans for the state, their mythology of self-sufficiency, local control, and individualism are at once the disguise for bourgeois rapacity and the Damocles sword that hangs over the bourgeoisie. The identification of family with the family-farm, of individuality with property, of self-reliance with self-employment, of liberty with local control, and tyranny with the state, conscription, surveillance, and police intervention into politics — all limit the capitalist enterprise in America and are as obstructive as they are self-serving.

Thus, a strong argument can be made for the need to recognize the hidden libertarian content of the American Dream: the possibility of democratizing the republic and radicalizing the democracy. Herein lies a radical agenda, rooted in the tension between corporatism and republicanism, centralism and democracy, bourgeois society and a libertarian society, that may create from the failed “perspectives” of the past a new reading of the future. A new libertarian politics must emerge from the debris of the classical Left. Politics in its original sense presupposed a very distinct public sphere — the community, be it a town, a neighborhood, or a city articulated into neighborhoods — in which passive residents could be transformed into active citizens by virtue of their direct access to the levers of power. Hence, politics cannot be divorced from an operational scale that fosters it: the community. Lacking this operational scale, it withers away, or worse, it becomes transformed into parliamentarism and the delegation of all power to professional politicians. Politics, so conceived, is *municipalist* or it does not exist at all.

Municipalism is a politics structured around the assembly of the citizen body, not its representatives. Collectively and individually, it must acquire a sense of itself, its social personality, its form. It is a politics that must not only involve citizens in communal administration; it must also *educate* them in public life.

Politics, so conceived, is the *communizing* core of community, the process of citizen-formation, the school in which character is developed as well as the art of citizenship. It is the medium for expanding one's *competence* in the fully human sense of the term and not just in the sense of skills in the performance of responsibilities.

The recreation of the *polis* has many aspects. Suffice it to say that an ecological sensibility is fostered by the interdependence of a parent and child, of children with each other and with adults, by production conceived as a symbiotic relation, not a domineering one, with tools that move with the grain of substance and its varied possibilities, not by forcing them selves on “raw matter” and ruthlessly torturing it into mere objects of utility. Finally, an ecological sensibility includes a politics of creative citizenship that opens a new sphere for education as well as administration, a politics of self-fulfillment and solidarity.

Ultimately the democratization of the republic and the radicalization of democracy is achievable only as a municipalist movement linked together confederally in opposition to the centralized nation-state. Hence, it will either move toward a radical form of libertarian municipalism or it will degenerate into another form of liberal parliamentarism that will end in the prevailing cor-

porative politics. The contrast between politics and parliamentarism, between the management of the *polis* and statecraft, cannot be drawn too sharply. In this distinction, the role of consciousness is decisive. Politics consists as much in the attainment of self-reflexivity of goals and processes as it does in the social functions it performs and the forms of freedom it institutionalizes.

To this end, the *polis* must itself be created out of smaller units — groups of people for whom the cultivation of consciousness is a calling in its own right. Education within this grouping is both an effort to realize the self-reflexivity that enters into an authentically creative citizenship and the means of mobilizing people for a new praxis. Self-reflexivity cannot be separated from selfadministration without reducing the group to a cellular academy at one extreme or an affinity group at the other. The formation of a collective subject that is not burdened by authoritarian Bolshevism is thus attained in the crafting of subjectivity as a *participatory* enterprise. Ultimately, this new radical agenda is as meaningful as the force-field and confrontation it creates between two powers: the centralized corporate state and the decentralized municipalities.

If the dissolution of the state is not an imminent possibility, the creation of a *counterpower* to it in the form of the libertarian municipalist confederation is a reasonable possibility at some time in the future. In any case, the problem of discriminating between politics and statecraft, the nature of one's participation in liberation movements, and finally the distinction between the municipality and the state itself, all pose problems that must be resolved with due regard for the nature of capitalist development.

Capitalism is not a decaying social order; it is an ever-expanding order that grows beyond the capacity of any society to contain its ravages and cope with its predatory activities. If capitalism is not abolished in one way or another, it will annihilate social life as such or, at least, do an excellent job of undermining it and the biosphere on which all life depends. The revolutions that we so facilely designate as bourgeois, i.e., the revolutions that created enough social instability to remove traditional constraints to capitalism's growth, were not cherished by the bourgeoisie. Rather, they saddled it with a heritage that now constitutes a major obstacle to its complete and unchecked dominance.

What appeals to Americans today is not the decorative side of their dream but its authentically libertarian side. Ideology still counts enough in the U.S. to bind a highly industrialized and increasingly centralized society in the straitjacket of a largely agrarian, individualistic, and still somewhat federal constitution with all the traditions that support this imagery. Nationalized or even collectivized property may be as onerous to most Americans as corporatized and monopolistic property. The *municipal* control of economic resources, by contrast, is much easier to accept. The current withdrawal of the nation-state from involvement with localities, economically as well as politically, poses the issue of municipal control more poignantly than at any time in American history, and the public uneasiness that accompanies the growth of state power is a desideratum in an increasingly totalitarian world.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Murray Bookchin  
Were We Wrong?  
1985

Retrieved on 26<sup>th</sup> October 2020 from [libcom.org](http://libcom.org)  
Published in *Telos*, Vol. 65, Fall, 1985, pp. 59–74.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**