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What is Libertarian Socialism?

Ulli Diemer

1997

We call ourselves *libertarian socialists*. But why the adjective? Why *libertarian* socialism? Is libertarian socialism any different from socialism as it is generally understood?

The problem, and the reason for the adjective, is that there exists no definition of socialism that is “generally understood”. The dilemma of socialism today is first of all the dilemma of the *meaning* of socialism, because the term has been applied to such an all-encompassing range of persons, parties, philosophies, states, and social systems, often completely antagonistic to each other, that the very term ‘socialism’ has become virtually meaningless.

There are more variations of socialism currently in existence than there are varieties of soup on the supermarket shelves, more socialist parties with the correct line than religious sects with a monopoly on salvation. Most of the earth’s people are now governed by states calling themselves socialist, states displaying among themselves the familiar antagonisms usually held to be hallmarks of capitalist imperialism, as well as every kind of social system presently in existence, from declining tribalism to advanced industrialism. Can there be *any* meaning worth salvaging in a label that has been claimed by Kautsky

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and Lenin, by Mao and Brezhnev, by Gandhi and Hitler, by Ed Broadbent and Karl Marx? Does the term connote anything more than “just” or “good” to its proponents, “bureaucratic” or “bad” to its enemies?

The temptation is strong to abandon the label entirely, to adopt some new term to indicate the kind of social change we propose. But to do so would be to attempt to side-step a problem that really cannot be avoided. For the terminological confusion is not accidental. Nor is it ‘merely’ a matter of words. It is rooted in the fact that the dominant social system always acts to integrate that which it cannot destroy — movements, ideas, even words — and therefore destroys them precisely by integrating them, by claiming them. It denies the very possibility of an alternative to itself, and proves this impossibility by absorbing the alternative and emptying it of meaning, by adopting new forms and new language which create the illusion of choice and change while perpetuating the same essential relations of domination. Since the main challenge to capitalism has always come from that which called itself socialism, it is hardly surprising that capitalist social relations have survived in half the world by calling themselves socialist. ‘Socialism’ has become another name for capitalism, another form of capitalism: in ‘victory’, socialism has been more totally buried than it ever could have been in defeat. Capitalism has dissolved the socialist alternative by stealing away its name, its language, and its dreams. We have to take them back, for without words there can be no concepts, and where there is no language of freedom, there can be no dream of liberation.

Consequently, we cannot simply abdicate the terminology of socialism and arbitrarily invent new labels. To do so would be futile, both because any new terms will be similarly sucked dry if they acquire popular recognition, and because the existing language of freedom refers to meanings and history that must be recovered from those who now suppress them by laying claim to them. Words such as ‘socialism’, ‘revolution’, ‘democ-

ideas. We want to destroy *all* uncritical acceptance and belief. We think that a critical examination of society leads to socialist conclusions, but what is important is not simply the conclusions but equally and even more so the method of arriving at them.

We base ourselves on the heritage of Marxism. This does not mean that we accept all the ideas of Marx, let alone of those who claim to be his followers. Marxism is a point of departure for us, not our pre-determined destination. We accept Marx's dictum that our criticism must fear nothing, including its own results. Our debt to Marxism will be no less if we find that we have to go beyond it.

Nothing could be more foreign to us than the "traditional Marxist" idea that all important questions have been answered. On the contrary, we have yet to formulate many of the important questions.

We have to try to maintain a balance of theory and practice which seeks to integrate them, and which recognizes that we must engage in both at all times.

The centre of gravity of our politics has to be when we are, not in the vicarious identification with struggles elsewhere. Solidarity work is important, but it cannot be the main focus of a socialist movement.

We don't know if we'll win: history is made by human beings, and where human beings are concerned, nothing is inevitable. But because people do make history, we know that it is *possible* to build a new world, and we strive to realize that possibility.

"There is only one reason for being a revolutionary — because it is the best way to live."

racy', and 'freedom' do contain within themselves a critique of the existing order. That critique can be realized only by reconquering it and giving it new life, not by abandoning it and searching for another.

For this reason, we start with the term 'socialism' and precede it with the adjective 'libertarian', which begins to elaborate that term, and which simultaneously makes it a new term, by differentiating it from all the other 'socialisms'. Perhaps most important, the adjective 'libertarian' raises questions in the minds of those who encounter it, whereas the term 'socialism' by itself tends to let itself be taken for granted, to act as an uninteresting vessel which each person fills with his preconceived ideas.

And by raising questions, the term libertarian socialism initiates the first step in a process of criticism that must be applied equally to capitalism and to 'socialism' as it is "generally understood". This process of criticism has not yielded any finished results that can be presented as a comprehensive picture of libertarian socialism. Indeed, the very concept of critique stands in opposition to the idea of having finished results. What is presented here are some beginnings, some themes for elaboration. Most of the ideas presented here are not new, but neither are they generally accepted.

What is implied by the term 'libertarian socialism'?

The idea that socialism is first and foremost about *freedom* and therefore about overcoming the domination, repression, and alienation that block the free flow of human creativity, thought, and action. We do not equate socialism with planning, state control, or nationalization of industry, although we understand that in a socialist society (not "under" socialism) economic activity will be collectively controlled, managed, planned, and owned. Similarly, we believe that socialism will involve equality, but we do not think that socialism is equality, for it is possible to conceive of a society where everyone is equally oppressed. We think that socialism is incompatible

with one-party states, with constraints on freedom of speech, with an elite exercising power 'on behalf of' the people, with leader cults, with any of the other devices by which the dying society seeks to portray itself as the new society.

An approach to socialism that incorporates cultural revolution, women's and children's liberation, and the critique and *transformation of daily life*, as well as the more traditional concerns of socialist politics. A politics that is completely revolutionary because it seeks to transform all of reality. We do not think that capturing the economy and the state lead automatically to the transformation of the rest of social being, nor do we equate liberation with changing our life-styles and our heads. Capitalism is a *total* system that invades all areas of life: socialism must be the overcoming of capitalist reality in its *entirety*, or it is nothing.

Libertarian politics concerns itself with the liberation of the individual *because* it is collective, and with the collective liberation *because* it is individualistic.

Being a socialist is not only an intellectual thing, a matter of having the right ideas or the right intellectual approach. It is also a matter of the way you lead your life.

A politics that is *revolutionary* because, in the words of Marx and Engels, "revolution is necessary not only because the *ruling* class cannot be overthrown any other way, but also because the class *overthrowing* it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew."

Because revolution is a collective process of self-liberation, because people and societies are transformed through struggle, not by decree, therefore "the emancipation of the working classes can only be achieved by the working classes themselves", not by a Leninist vanguard, a socialist state, or any other agent acting on their behalf.

A conception of the left not as separate from society, but as part of it. We of the left are people who are subjected to

social oppression like everyone else, who struggle for socialism because our own liberation is possible only when all society is liberated. We seek to bring others to our socialist project not to do them a favour, but because we need their help to achieve our own liberation. Cohn-Bendit's comment that "It is for yourself that you make the revolution" is not an individualistic position, but the key to a truly collective politics, based on the joy and promise of life, instead of on the self-sacrifice that is often the radical's version of the white man's burden.

We of the left see ourselves as equal participants in the struggle, not as the anointed leaders of it. We put forward our socialist vision as part of our contribution, but we do not think that our belief in socialism means that we have all the answers. We deal with people honestly, as equals, not presuming the right to dictate what they shall think or do, nor presuming that we have nothing to learn from them. We have enough faith in our politics that we do not seek to manipulate people to our conclusions.

As socialists we form organizations with other people who share our ideas. This is necessary and valid, but it represents a situation that we should continually try to overcome, not one that we should accept and even institutionalize in the Leninist mode. Socialism implies not only the withering away of the state, but also the *withering away of the left* and its organizations as separate entities. Power in a socialist society must be exercised in ways allowing the participation of everyone, not only those belonging to a given organization. This must be pre-figured in the political forms and movements that emerge *before* the revolution. The ultimate goal of the left and its organizations must not be to rule society, but to abolish themselves.

The most important component of socialist consciousness is *critical thought*. We must learn to think about everything critically, to take nothing for granted, nothing as given. Consequently, we do not want people to accept socialist ideas in the way they now accept, partially or completely, bourgeois