The Soul of Socialism

written by Ronald Aronson | February 20, 2010

IF ONE OF THE GREAT SOCIALIST LEADERS of a century ago could see us now — Debs, say, or Luxemburg — he or she would certainly be puzzled by the state of the world. In every direction they would be able to see struggles for liberation or the fruits of such struggles: of those with whom they would immediately be in solidarity, such as women, former slaves, indigenous people, former colonial people, and racial, religious, and ethnic minorities. Their hearts would be gladdened by the ways in which our world has been changed by such movements, but they would be shocked by the fate of socialism. By the end of the 20th century, the bureaucratic socialism erected by Communist revolutions in underdeveloped countries such as Russia and China, carried elsewhere on bayonets, and emulated by the least developed countries, had largely given up the ghost. And the welfare-state socialism of the advanced societies, having long since laid claim to being no more than an efficient and humane way of managing capitalism, was giving in to its harsher neoliberal cousin, or being pushed aside.[1] Socialism? A world dominated by globalization and obsessed by terrorism and the "war" against it seems to have moved on to other concerns, other struggles. Rather than participants in a vast movement proclaiming history's next stage, socialists seem fated to be lone individuals making our loudest noises in universities, journals, bookstores, and conferences

How is it that other causes have been advanced but not socialism? In the late 19th and early 20th century, socialists, moved by the sense that history was going their way, acted from a deep confidence that the proletariat's struggles would lead to a society of equals based on collective ownership of the means of production. The world's first true democracy, socialism would abolish classes, domination, and exploitation. Rooted in the industrial revolution, the new society of plenty would eliminate the division of labor and permit the fullest possible individual development.

According to Marxism, this possibility was rigorously historical. First, it would build on capitalism's achievements as well as on all of prior human social and economic development. And second, capitalism's contradictions, and the inner logic of class conflict, were generating this revolutionary alternative to the capitalist system. United in struggle, the workers would grasp the system's inability to meet their most vital need as well as their own ability to take power and create a new social order. Their class-consciousness anticipated the end of history as we know it — humanity's blind submission to forces beyond control — and the beginning of a new kind of history, where social reality would be subject to conscious and democratic control. And so Ernst Bloch spoke of "militant optimism" — human action based on scientific analysis of social reality, animated by hope that utopia itself was around the corner. These themes were not simply ideas or theories, but animating principles. Various individuals might be more inspired by certain of them — perhaps Debs by the workers' suffering and struggle to end wage slavery, Luxemburg by the historical process leading to a classless society. But all socialists sensed the connection between the working class, the historical process, socialization of the means of production, the end of class society, and the advent of a free and democratic society of equals. The commitment to become part of this process, and to act to make it happen, was the soul of classical socialism.

Much of the 20th century centered on these hopes, with militants seeking to fulfill them, opponents struggling ferociously against them, successful revolutionaries working to realize them under near-impossible conditions, moderate parliamentarians seeking to advance them inch by inch. Both revolutionaries and reformers actually did arrive in power, and both called what they did "socialism." Yet in the process something strange happened: under the immense strains of war and civil war, postwar desolation, depression, and the ebbs and flows of class-consciousness — and in

response to the unexpected staying power and productive force of capitalism — revolutionary socialists abandoned workers' democracy and democratic socialists gave up on abolishing capitalism. Committed and brilliant leaders lost their bearings.

For example, Isaac Deutscher's recently republished *Trotsky*, one of the great 20th-century histories and biographies, reminds us of the towering revolutionary's unacknowledged redefinition of Marxism in the face of unanticipated trends and events. Trotsky abandoned Marxism's insistence on realism and adopted wishful thinking about the possibility of revolution outside of Russia in order to make the Bolshevik Revolution, and then he subsequently abandoned his commitment to workers' democracy in order that the Revolution might survive.[2] Ambivalent about both steps, Deutscher argued that the Revolution's fatal illusions and its embrace of the one-party state were necessary, indeed, were themselves produced by history. He insisted that without the fantasy of a European proletarian uprising, the Bolsheviks would never have dared to seize power in 1917 in peasant Russia. If the situation in which they found themselves eventually came to be dominated by Stalin, this was by a tragic necessity: modernizing a backward and brutal society could only take place through a brutal process. And yet for Deutscher the essence of socialism was achieved through Stalin's creation of Russia's nationalized industrial economy and its modern industrial working class. Once these had been brought into being an increasingly democratic and egalitarian Soviet Union could follow.

As Daniel Singer said, this kind of thinking "missed the connection between ends and means."[3] This simple criticism contains our whole problem in a nutshell: to develop a viable 21st century alternative we must insist that a socialism that loses its soul will not regain it later. Both Communists and Social Democrats paid homage to the workers in official pronouncements and honored them in song and story — but they also spoke for them and kept them from power. In the end, many of the people living under Communism, and their leaders, summarily liquidated it. Others drifted away from social democracy in small, barely noticeable steps. The new century began with what remained of socialist hopes in tatters.

The unraveling was hailed by Francis Fukuyama's declaration that although the "end of history" had indeed occurred, it meant not the attainment of socialism but the opposite, that we could no longer imagine a "future that is not essentially democratic and capitalist." Many of our grandparents may have grown up expecting a "radiant socialist future" but "we cannot picture to ourselves a world that is *essentially* different from the present one, and at the same time better."[4]

Perhaps this triumphant conclusion helps answer some of the questions socialists ask about why Ossama bin Laden has emerged as the most visible torchbearer against American-led globalization. Why do masses of people seem to be cheering suicide bombers rather than collectively analyzing and acting to change their situation? Fukuyama's conservative Hegelian smugness suggests a possible explanation for al Qaeda's fundamentalist barbarism: in a world without a visible, feasible alternative, might not some of those who feel overwhelmed by this world be tempted to explode against it?

If so, we ask with growing urgency: after Communism, after social democracy, how do we regenerate the sense of an alternative? Given that socialism's hopes were recast, compromised, betrayed, and defeated again and again in the 20th century, what is the soul of socialism today?

WE TALK ABOUT IT by using awkward metaphors, not only ‘soul" but also "spirit" and "spring," and terms like "vital essence" and "animating principle." As we have seen in discussing classical socialism, the subjectivity of such language conveys the shared commitments of specific individuals

at a specific point in history. Today, what moves *us*, we who are socialists, we who would act together to transform structures characterized by "iron laws" and "bottom lines" into a transparently human society? We know that to become a real historical force again, our spirit must resonate with others, and it must fit today's social, economic, and political possibilities. Only then can it become a touchstone against which to judge the capitalist order, to make sense of daily life and to put forth an alternative.

And where do we look for it? We continue to use the name "socialism," accept many of its analyses and some of its history, and honor its great proponents. So why not simply return to classical socialism's original vital principles? If socialist movements and leaders abandoned the spirit of socialism, perhaps we need only recover its uncorrupted "essence" and become its 21st century champions?

The problem is that vital principles live in history and change with it — even the most beautiful ones, those of socialists no less than others. There is no returning to the old socialist movement's hegemonic claims to be *the* movement of human liberation. As Communism and Social Democracy have faded, as the industrial working class has shrunk in size, it has become clear that movements for fundamental social change will have to reach far beyond workers to be successful. Virtually all social movements of the second half of the 20th century have flourished *outside of* socialist movements and organizations. The movements have opposed forms of oppression which, because they are for example racial, national, or sexual in nature, cut across class lines and do not turn on the capital-labor nexus. These are indeed movements for equality — but not the same kinds of equality that socialists demanded.

Accustomed to hegemony over all movements against oppression, socialists struggled mightily to convince themselves and others that socialism would overcome each particular form of domination, for example, racism or sexism. Yet the soul of socialism inclined away from women *as* women, former slaves *as* former slaves. No matter how deeply moved socialists were by a belief in equality, their call to arms was addressed to, and their vision stemmed from, the working class. Women's liberation was not socialism's priority. And women understood: unless their own oppression was specifically targeted, and by themselves, it would never be overcome. Once they posed such issues, it was inevitable that autonomous movements would emerge, and that socialism would lose its theoretical and organizational priority.

Yet no group can achieve its own liberation by itself — each one's success requires a much larger movement. Today we can only imagine socialists functioning successfully as part of a radical coalition which will incorporate all of the movements of the dominated, oppressed, and exploited, as well as environmentalists, into a complex, pluralistic force. There is no returning to the "militant optimism" of a hundred years ago. Socialism's spirit of that era cannot subsist unchanged like a Platonic form outside the concrete historical world and independently of its specific historical actors. Indeed, our use of "soul" today would not have gone down well a hundred years ago. Objectivist materialism dominated socialist thinking then, and it mistakenly placed faith in a historical process said to be bringing about human emancipation.

As environmentalism has taught us, we must also jettison the 19th and early 20th century's optimism about science and industrialization, and socialism's indifference to the natural world. And, as all of the new social movements have made clear, we can never again hope to focus narrowly on economics and institutional change. Above all, 21st century socialists will have to reverse 20th century socialism's whittling down of equality and democracy, expanding and deepening their commitment to struggling against not only economic exploitation, but against all forms of domination, including racial, gender, national, sexual, or religious. Such changes in the soul of socialism are responses both to the Old Left's failures and to the force of feminism and the other

new social movements. They have also placed on the agenda *how* movements function, how we think about and act towards each other. They have already taught us a great deal about ourselves, the societies we seek to change, and the society we seek to create.

But what of our bedrock commitment to workers' struggles leading to their increasing class-consciousness and attaining power with the goals of socializing the means of production and achieving a classless society? The 20th century did not treat these hopes kindly. Are they still among our vital principles?

Capitalism remains one of humanity's central problems, and its driving force and underlying structures remain unchanged from a century ago. It cannot be abolished without a workers' movement consciously posing workers' issues. Certainly workers continue to struggle against the capitalist system in piecemeal and specific ways, but does it still make sense to talk about them becoming class- conscious? Paradoxically, late 20th century workers were often sharply class-conscious, but narrowly so. Too often a class consciousness that was local or focused on a single trade or industry prevailed at the expense of a wider, more inclusive, less racialized, and more universal class membership.[5] Equally important, workers' often-embattled status and dwindling numerical strength has diminished their belief in the possibility of creating a different society, heightening their attachment to narrow goals at the expense of broader social concerns. And certainly the pull at any moment of any of an individual's multiple affinities and identities — ethnicity, religion, race, gender — has limited the power of class as a theme of struggle, without causing it to disappear completely.

These 20th-century inhibitions on class-consciousness may change in the context of the growing multiculturalism of most working classes and their increasing international interdependency. Even in the United States, trade union activists without a global consciousness are becoming few and far between. Contact with South African workers today reveals both a strong class-consciousness and considerable receptivity to socialism; international exchanges may teach these workers some of the collective-bargaining skills mastered by their foreign brothers and sisters, but it may also remind workers elsewhere of their common problems and common enemies. The anti- globalization struggles of workers alongside other social movements may have a similar effect. The slogan, "Workers of the world, unite" is still a meaningful one in the face of a capitalism which, if anything, has grown more rapacious with victory, and which tends more and more to place all workers in the same boat.

And there are others in the boat as well. Every one of the new social movements sooner or later runs up against the institutional constraints imposed by capitalism, and faces the dilemma of being unable to achieve its goals without becoming anti-capitalist. In the case of environmentalism this is for obvious structural reasons — the economy must be both controlled and redirected in radically new ways if the natural world is to be protected. In the case of women it is also structural, although perhaps less obviously so: women will become equal only if thousands of years of patriarchy are overcome, and this will happen only to the extent that social priorities change and, among other things, work and child-rearing are drastically reconfigured. Other historically oppressed groups, such as African-Americans or South African blacks, require a radical redistribution of resources if they are ever to achieve full equality.

The point is not to bring all of these struggles under socialist hegemony — it is too late for that — but to stress that future movements of social transformation will not be of, by, and for workers alone. For their own purposes, every one of the new social movements has reason to listen to a socialist movement, and for its own purposes, a socialist movement has reason to listen to the new social movements. In our heart of hearts socialists still believe that our project announces a new phase of human development by seeking to end economic exploitation and social classes. But this is

conceivable only alongside other movements, which will call into question other forms of oppression. Socialists envisage a genuinely ethical world in which universal rather than class justice will reign, but this is unthinkable without also attacking injustice on racial, gender, religious, ethnic, and national grounds.

And this will mean that socialists, and everyone else, will have to consider equality differently, and more fully than before, both as the movement's goal and its internal operating principle. Not quite the old socialist equality and not quite the various equalities of the new socialist movements, it will be a new-old one, enriched and deepened by the interaction of all of the movements in coalition, celebrating not only workers but specific human beings and the human community as such, not postponed to the future but lived as a daily practice.

As we and our allies look around at our global capitalist society, socialists may be the ones to stress that in every direction we see dazzling material achievements, with new ones springing up by the day. In anti- globalization struggles, we may be the ones to emphasize how much thwarted human possibility is contained in the labor that created them. But we are certainly not the only ones to know that we stand on the shoulders of previous generations, or to insist on picking up where their struggles for social justice left off. Or to believe fervently that our goal is "a society in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."

In the radical Hegelian sense taught by Herbert Marcuse, Marx's vision of equality will be preserved, canceled, and liberated in 21st century socialism. It will retain its old meanings but be part of a new spirit, in its solidarity combining deep self-interest with universal morality. It should stimulate respect for, indeed, a delight in, difference, a deeper respect for each person's fundamental humanity, and a new and far more concrete sense than ever before of "all of us" — meaning, for the first time, *on their own terms,* everyone in the world

BEDROCK SOCIALIST VALUES, absorbing a fuller and more urgent sense of equality and embracing diverse social movements across the globe — in this we can begin to discern the soul of 21st century socialism. Yet something more is needed — a specific response to 21st century capitalism's drive to render people passive, to pass them through the sieve of the market, to wrap them in a cocoon of corporate-controlled consumerism and media. Today's global capitalism quite deliberately attacks social being itself and renders democracy meaningless. As Margaret Thatcher famously said, "There is no society, only individuals." Her "individuals," of course, were devoted to their own self-interest, and, in the neoliberal order she helped initiate, private profit. With the market becoming the central social institution and much of the rest of the social world privatized, social life was removed from social control.

Today the social world is veiled, mystified, and under increasing attack even as our universal interconnectedness is intensifying. In reality we live in an interdependent global society — just turn on the computer and "visit" the Internet — but our complex interactions do not foster social awareness. Capitalism's victory has brought the privatization of hope, the mutation of public themes into private ones. In the advanced societies, the social safety net has been coming under constant attack, while the less developed societies are pressured to turn away from traditional communities and their public realm: the dominant practices of the global economy emphasize individual responsibility, personal initiative, and the centrality of the private. A "political class" handles collective business, is increasingly limited to setting rules and providing essential infrastructures for private, especially economic activity.

This is ideology, but it is much more. That people believe it is a great paradox of our time. The

more interdependent each person in the world becomes, and the more large corporations rule not only economic but social life, the less social awareness there seems to be and the more individuals seek to flee into the areas they control personally. The shrinking of collective hope has also been powerfully accentuated by global corporations, agencies like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, the Internet, and the ceaseless commercial creativity of consumer capitalism, all of which conspire to generate a field of dazzling possibilities for individual initiative and choice. The word "lifestyle" permeates our conversation for good reason. Middle-class individuals are now free as never before to live their individual lives as they wish, to adopt or design precisely the religions, modes of behavior, and identifications they wish. In shopping, one individual's social contribution, expressed in financial compensation, finds a connection with other individuals' social contribution, congealed in products, with one's control reduced to purchasing and consuming and the entire operation performed in private spaces ruled over by large corporations. And in watching television, one individual's membership in the society becomes lived passively and in isolation from others as a viewer of endless news and commentary, entertainment and advertising, with one's control reduced to changing channels and the entire operation ruled over by large corporations.

We socialists reject the lie of a privatized universe in the name of living as members of a society. It is vital, then, to underscore "the social" in the soul of socialism today, and to say that we should be about defending it, reclaiming it, rethinking it, and experiencing it anew. But what kind of social? Who controls it? Who benefits from it? Ours are class societies, many of whose deepest human dimensions are also structured from top to bottom according to hierarchy, privilege, domination, and exploitation — in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and nationality. Other social institutions, the more universal and benevolent ones, are under attack today — in the interests of hierarchy, privilege, domination, and exploitation. More or less democratic social acquisitions should obviously be defended, such as health care, social security, public schools and universities, retirement and labor legislation, and even extended, especially where they can be managed by communities, municipalities, and regions.

But much of life is dominated by the "bad social." Capitalism's anti-social social, the market, is everywhere, everyone, everything, every hour of every day. The fetishism of commodities infects every space, every person. Social forces, such as the market and the media, hide their human face and are experienced as almost irresistible natural forces. These can be effectively opposed only by active, collective participation in democratic communities. But who can conceive of rebelling in the name of democratic social control? In the name of a "we" that is not passive and dominated? In much of the North and much of the South, this prospect is becoming almost incomprehensible. As a result people want to get away, or they want to explode.

Yes, a socialist movement must aggressively invoke, protect, and reassert the social today, but animated not only by key traditional socialist goals and the spirit of the new social movements, but also in a militant, democratic spirit. We will be moved by our need to counter abstract and overwhelming forces with concrete face-to-face human interactions. We will speak for the social in active and egalitarian ways that redefine the meaning of citizenship and celebrate and extend solidarity.

Its spirit must be one of active participation. Francis Jeanson's difficult-to-translate term for this is *citoyennisation*. "Citoyen" has a richer charge than the English "citizen" due to its associations with the French Revolution, during which it became an accepted form of address. Jeanson further means breaking with the passivity and feeling of social helplessness encouraged by capitalist globalization, and acting alongside others to shape decisive areas of our collective existence. This means "becoming citizens," or — because in doing so we must sharply reject what passes for "choice" and for "democracy" today — "militantly becoming citizens."[6]

When a small group of people decides to go door to door in their community to oppose the American war against Iraq, for example, they may seek to talk with their neighbors about how the war affects their community. In the very act of doing so something new is created. First, in reaching out to one's neighbors about "our" common problems, the person doing so shifts from being a private person to a public person. This is why one can feel oneself speaking differently than usual, because in the process one doesn't simply lose his or her bashfulness, but acts as a citizen, a social person. Second, any group of people doing this together becomes an active *we*, challenging one public policy in the name of another and better one. In the process, they do not simply think about what they should or might do, they do it, and live their social morality actively. And thirdly, in conversation, whether in agreeing or debating, all those involved, for a brief moment, can become citizens listening to each other and concerned collectively for their common fate. What motivated the process, of course, was building a force to change government policy, but that is far off. There is a more immediate purpose: the goal of the process lies in doing it.[7]

Active, militant citizens living democratically will naturally find themselves in solidarity with each other, with those to whom they appeal face to face, and eventually with anti-globalization movements and struggles of others who are oppressed in different ways. But this is more than a "motherhood and apple pie" requirement of social activists today. It involves recognizing our own profound interdependency with the rest of the world. The anti-sweatshop movement, for example, begins with consciousness of the labels on the clothing people wear. They act in solidarity with those who have made those clothes, foreign workers. In the best of cases they link up with actual groups of workers in specific factories seeking to form unions and improve their conditions. Local legislation, here, has a direct effect on people's lives, there. Goals and action are concrete.

Of course such a sense of solidarity is not new to socialists — the experience of young people volunteering for the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War is etched on many of our hearts and minds. But today the sense that "we are the world" has spread far more widely than ever. In the world of global terrorism right-wing Americans may be self-obsessed and nationalistic as never before, but much of the rest of humanity comfortably accepts living in the wider world. Effective global solidarity is still a long way off, but television and the Internet have created stunning new possibilities for people to experience themselves internationally and act in concert. Twenty years ago many of us participated in separate national anti-apartheid movements, sharing an international awareness, and we have since grown accustomed to belonging to a single worldwide anti-globalization movement, and then to a single worldwide anti-war movement. Over time we have built such movements, and a new sense of international solidarity and citizenship, into our very consciousness and functioning.

SINCE SEPTEMBER 11 the world has been offered a choice between competing Manicheanisms, each side defending Good and making war against Evil. Can we reject the either/or on behalf of an alternative that has a chance of liberating human possibilities rather than crushing them? It would take us back to the goals of socialism and forward to the 21st century spirit of expanding solidarity and militant citizenship. Moved by these vital principles, we hope to participate in a broad and diverse worldwide movement which will live and struggle towards a richer and deeper sense of equality, democracy, and human community than people have ever experienced. The commitment to join this process and make it happen — this is the soul of socialism today.

Footnotes

1. Daniel Singer describes this *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?*, New York, 1999, part one.

2. See my review of Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky 1879-1921; The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky 1921-1929; The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky 1929- 1940*, in *The Nation*, March 14, 2005.

3. Singer, 25.

4. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York, 1992, 46.

5. In the 1971 Newark teachers' strike, militant teachers found themselves ranged against militant advocates of community control. This is a particularly powerful example of a conflict between class-conscious workers and the movement for African American liberation. See Steve Golin, *The Newark Teacher Strikes: Hopes on the Line*, New Brunswick, New Jersey, 2002.

6. Interview with the author, July, 2001 and June, 2003. The term is scattered throughout Jeanson's recent writings and interviews. See, for example, Francis Jeanson and Christiane Philip, *Entre-deux*, Bordeaux, 2000; and Francis Jeanson, "Pour une dialectisation du local et du mondial," *Le Passant ordinaire*, Septembre 2001 – Octobre 2001.

7. Phyllis Aronson, in her role as founding chair of the Huntington Woods Peace, Citizenship and Education Project, in discussion with the author, July, 2004.