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G.A. COHEN*

Is There Still a Case for Socialism?[1]

1. Is there still a case for socialism? The question arises because of two large challenges to the nineteenth century case for socialism thrown up by the history of the twentieth century. These challenges have cast the traditional case for socialism into disarray, and there is now a serious need for reconstruction.

'Socialism', the world 'socialism', is the name of an ideal, and it is also the name of a movement. Historical experience proves that the ideal needs to be rethought, and it is, of course, being rethought, very widely, and sometimes, as I shall explain, it is being rethought too much: in the wake of a massively disappointing historical experience, there is an understandable, but regrettable, inclination to abandon too much of the inherited ideal. And the lines of the *movement* for socialism, traditionally conceived as a movement centrally of the industrial working class, also need to be redrawn. Transformations in the class structure of Western capitalist society[2] necessitate a new conception of the agency for socialist change.

In this essay I shall begin by reflecting on the inherited ideal, on how it stands now, and then I shall confront the challenge to the old conception of socialist agency. I shall close with a few remarks on the paradoxical import for both the socialist ideal and the socialist movement of the looming environmental or ecological crisis.

2. A strong commitment to socialism was fixed, for me, early in my life. My parents were communist Jewish factory workers, in Montreal, Canada, and they sent me to an elementary school which was run by a Jewish communist organization. There I was taught an orthodox socialism, of unambiguously Soviet orientation. Soviet socialism, both as a state structure, and as an aspiration, now lies in ruins. For people of my background that is a great loss, and I want to begin by discussing how those of us who have sustained this loss manage our bereavement. Tennyson's Ulysses says 'Though much is taken, much abides'. To see what abides, we must acknowledge what has been taken.

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The Soviet socialist ideal presented itself differently to different believers in it, but it included, for all of us, the following elements, and it was, consequently, prodigiously demanding: instead of the class exploitation of capitalism, economic equality; instead of the illusory democracy of class-based bourgeois politics, a real and complete democracy; instead of the alienation from one another of economic agents driven by greed and fear, an economy characterized by willing mutual service.

People have reacted in different ways when they have concluded that no progress towards the ideal which they once thought the Soviet Union was realising will occur there in the foreseeable future. Their reactions have depended on how they are disposed to explain the Soviet failure, on how they conceive the relationship, in general, between political ideals and political practice, and on aspects of their emotional make-up, such as how robust they are. These variations generate a ramified taxonomy, and, without trying to depict all of it, I want to describe some of its salient branches.

First, there are those who both preserve their belief in the ideal and sustain their commitment to pursuing it, with a fresh view about how and/or where and/or when it is to be achieved.

Others repudiate the unachieved ideal, sometimes after careful reconsideration of its claims, and sometimes through a form of self-deception in which they let those claims fade from their minds. In either case, a new ideal is adopted and a new politics elected, but those who pass on to them without reflection and in recoil from their loss are practising what has been called adaptive preference formation. Adaptive preference formation is an irrational process in which a person comes to prefer A to B just because A is available and B is not. That A is more accessible than B is not a reason for thinking that A is better than B, but A's greater availability can nevertheless cause a person to think that A is better. The fox who tries and fails to reach the grapes has no reason to conclude that they are sour, but his failure causes him to fall into that conviction.

Still others among the politically bereaved form a mixed collection of types who have it in common that they turn away altogether from politics. Some of them still acknowledge the authority of the original ideal, but they are convinced that it is impossible to realise, or virtually impossible, or anyway something they can no longer summon the energy to fight for: perhaps, when they let the baton fall, they hope that somebody else will pick it up. Others reject the ideal and are unable to embrace a different one. To all of these nothing now achievable seems worth achieving, or worth the effort of their own depleted power. When they look at the political world, 'Vanity of Vanities' is what they are inclined to say.

In what follows, I shall endorse sustained pursuit of something like the original ideal, but first I want to say a word about the Vanity of

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Vanities response, because I have been tempted by it myself in moments when the old ideal has appeared to me to be hopelessly over-ambitious; and also about the response of Adaptive Preference Formation, because, so it seems to me, it is a temptation to which many on the left are currently succumbing.

3. Vanity of Vanities, or, rather, the form of it that has tempted me, says: genuine socialism is impossible, or virtually impossible, to achieve. It is overwhelmingly likely that the best we shall ever get is some kind of capitalism, and it is for others to find the strength to fight for a better capitalism. Here the old ideal remains bright, but the will collapses, and, integral to its collapse, both helping to induce it and feeding on it, is a pessimistic judgment of possibility that spreads its gloom across perception of the whole feasible set, so that the person says: what is really good is not to be had, and there is nothing good enough for me to devote myself to.

A period of withdrawal following disappearance of what one hoped would fulfil one's dream is, of course, entirely natural. Time is needed to work things through. What is more, depression about the failure of the Soviet Union, as it supervenes in those of us who reluctantly rejected its claims decades ago, perforce has a complex structure, one element in which is self-reproach, since what is lost is a long since denied (yet also fiercely clung to) love. Those of us on the left who were stern critics of the Soviet Union long before it collapsed acted like disappointed little boys pummelling their father's chest. The last thing we wanted was that the old man should collapse: he needed to be there to receive our blows. The Soviet Union needed to be there as a defective model so that, with one eye on it, we could construct a better one. It created a non-capitalist space in which to think about socialism.

Against such a psychological background, it may be unwise to expect to reach full clarity of purpose quickly. It is nevertheless right to resist the movement from a perhaps necessary depression to a settled Vanity of Vanities attitude.

If Vanity of Vanities sees nothing good when the best appears lost, Adaptive Preference Formation treats the best it can find as the best that could be conceived. In Adaptive Preference the grass looks greener on *this* side of the fence: the agent's assessment ordering bends round to favour what (he thinks) is in the feasible set. In my opinion, this pathology is visible in a movement of thought which is widespread in contemporary Western socialism.

4. Let me explain. Nineteenth-century socialists were for the most part opposed to market organization of economic life. The pioneers favoured something which they thought would be far superior, to wit, comprehensive central planning, and their later followers were encouraged by what they interpreted as victories of planning, such as

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Stalin's industrialization drive and the early institution of educational and medical provision in the People's Republic of China. More recently, however, many socialists have concluded that central planning is a poor recipe for economic success. And now there is among socialist intellectuals and intelligent movement, but also, and alongside it, an unthinking and fashion-driven rush, in the direction of a non-planning or minimally planning *market* socialist society. Market socialism is socialist because it overcomes the division between capital and labour: there is, in market socialism, no separate class of capitalists facing workers who own no capital, since workers themselves own the firms. But market socialism is unlike traditionally conceived socialism in that its worker-owned firms confront one another, and consumers, in competitive market-contractual fashion; and market socialism is also, and relatedly, unlike traditionally conceived socialism in that it reduces, even though it does not entirely eliminate, the traditional socialist emphasis on economic equality. I believe that it is good for the political prospects of socialism that market socialism is being brought to the fore as an object of advocacy and policy: these socialist intellectuals, even some of the fashion-driven ones, are performing a useful political service. But I also think that market socialism is at best second best, even if it is the best (or more than the best) at which it is now reasonable to aim, and that many socialist intellectuals who think otherwise are indulging in Adaptive Preference.

Now, the Adaptive Preference response sometimes has some good effects. Like the rational policy of Not Crying Over Spilt Milk, it may prevent fruitless lamentation and wasted effort. But Adaptive Preference also has great destructive potential, since it means losing standards that may be needed to guide criticism of the *status quo*, and it dissolves the faith to which a future with ampler possibilities may yet be hospitable. If you cannot bear to remember the goodness of the goal that you sought and which is not now attainable, you may fail to pursue it should it come within reach, and you will not try to bring it within reach. When the fox succeeds in convincing himself that the grapes are sour, he does not build the ladder that might enable him to get at them.

In 1983 there appeared an important book by Alec Nove, called *The Economics of Feasible Socialism*. One point of including the word 'feasible' in its title was or should have been to abjure the claim that the arrangements recommended in the book are the best conceivable. I do not think that Nove would say, for example, that the market socialism he recommends fully satisfies socialist standards of distributive justice, though he would rightly say that it scores better by those standards than market capitalism does. Notwithstanding that relative superiority, market socialism remains deficient from a socialist point of view, if only because, in socialist perception, there is

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injustice in a system which confers high rewards on people who happen to be unusually talented and who form highly productive co-operatives.

In 1989 there appeared another important book, by David Miller, called *Market, State and Community*, which, like Nove's, advocates market socialism. But, in Chapter Six of his book, Miller seems to me to promote Adaptive Preference Formation. It is, in my view, a serious mistake to suppose that any market system (except, perhaps, the very special one—of which I shall say more later—designed by Joseph Carens) could conform to the requirements of distributive justice. Yet in Chapter Six Miller argues that market socialism tends to reward personal desert and therefore is, substantially, distributively just. I disagree both with the premiss (that market socialism tends to reward desert) and with the inference (that it follows that it is just) of that argument, and I also reject its conclusion (that market socialism is just).

I do not say that we should aim to achieve, in this era of ideologically rejuvenated capitalism, a form of socialism very different from what Nove and Miller describe. As far as immediate political programmes are concerned, market socialism is probably is a good idea. But Miller's (and others') claims for it are grander, and they should not be accepted. One reason why they should not be accepted may be recovered from the thought of Karl Marx, to an aspect of which I now turn.

5. Marx was no friend of the market, even in its socialist form. The communist society which he envisaged proclaimed the slogan 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'. We could argue about what it means for each to give according to his ability, and about what it means for each to get according to his needs. But, for our purposes, the unambiguous message of the communist slogan is that what you get is *not* a function of what you give, that contribution and reward are entirely separate matters. You do not get more because you produce more, and you do not get less because you are not good at producing. Accordingly, the ideal figured forth in the communist slogan represents a complete rejection of the logic of the market.

Marx also described a second best to full communism, which he called 'the first phase of communist society', a phase transitional to the final one in which the just discussed principle of distribution is sovereign. Because of later Marxist verbal usage, the two phases are more familiarly known under the titles 'socialism' and 'communism'. And although Marxist socialism is not a market socialism, Marx's criticism of that transitional form of society also bears against market socialism.

Marxist socialism, the lower phase of communism, is a non-market society in which remuneration is supposed to reward labour contribution. That is the import of its ruling slogan, which says: To

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each according to his contribution. If, as David Miller thinks, contribution establishes desert and rewarding desert suffices for justice, then Marxist socialism would possess the virtue that it rewards desert and is, therefore, just: perhaps, indeed, more just than any market socialism could be.

That last speculation is, however, a pretty idle one, since measuring contribution in a non-market society requires questionable assignments of product to heterogeneous labours, and to labours of different skill levels; and, while a market society assigns salaries to labour in an automatic process free of the application of contestable criteria, it is impossible to treat those salaries as measures of *contribution*, influenced as they are by vagaries of bargaining power and other accidental market circumstance. It is, accordingly, difficult to compare the relative merits of the two forms of socialism as devices for rewarding producers according to their contribution.

But let us here set aside the question of whether Marx was right to prefer a non-market socialism to a market one, and also the problem of how labour contributions are to be measured. Of greater present relevance is that Marx's strictures against the principle of reward to contribution expose the anti-socialist (because bourgeois) character of market socialism's reward structure. While pointing out that first-stage communism abolishes capitalist exploitation, since differential access to means of production is gone, and no one consumes more labour value than he produces, Marx criticized the principle of reward for contribution because of the (unjust) inequality that it generates. For Marx, it is indeed a recommendation of low-stage communism that the bourgeois principle of reward for contribution is in this society not just invoked as ideological rationalization but actually instituted, so that 'principle and practice are no longer at loggerheads'. But he did not doubt that reward for contribution *is* a bourgeois principle, one which treats a person's talent 'as a natural privilege'. Reward for contribution honours the principle of self-ownership, which says that each person is that person's private property. Nothing is more bourgeois than that principle—it is, indeed, *the* principle of the bourgeois revolution—and the lesson for market socialism of Marx's critique is that, while market socialism may remove the income injustice caused by differential ownership of capital, it preserves the income injustice caused by differential ownership of endowments of personal capacity.

6. Before we settle for market socialism, let us recall why socialists in the past rejected the market. Some of their reasons were better than others, and here I shall review that I take to be the four principal criticisms of the market in the socialist tradition, starting with two that I consider misplaced, and ending with two that I consider sound.

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The market was judged (1) inefficient, (2) anarchic, (3) unjust in its results, and (4) mean in its motivational presuppositions.

(1) To say that the market is inefficient is to criticize it in its allocative as opposed to in its distributive function, where allocation concerns the assignment of resources to different productive uses (so much steel to housing and so much to automobiles and so many engineers to each and so on) and distribution concerns the assignment of income to owners of productive factors (who are, in a purely socialist market socialism, owners of labour power only). Manifestly, allocation and distribution are in intimate causal relationship, but the bottom line of this first criticism relates to allocation alone: it is that the market is wasteful, variously over- and under-productive, and here the question of who in particular suffers from that waste is set to one side. And the reason for the wastefulness, so the criticism goes, is that in a market economy, production and investment are not planned.

We now know that the traditional socialist view about the market's lack of planning was misconceived. It failed to acknowledge how remarkably well the unplanned market organizes information, and, indeed, how difficult it is for a planning centre to possess itself of the information about preferences and production possibilities dispersed through the market in a non-planning system. Even if the planner's computer could do wonders with that information, the problem is that there are systematic obstacles to gathering it: to that extent, Ludwig Von Mises and Friedrich Hayek, the formidable Austrian critics of socialism, were right. And the traditional socialist critique also failed to appreciate the degree to which it would prove possible to correct for market deficiencies through an external regulation which falls far short of comprehensive planning.

(2) There was, however, in the traditional socialist objection to the absence of a plan, a separate emphasis that the market's generation of massive unplanned outcomes, considered just as such, that is, apart from the particular disbenefits and injustices of those outcomes, is deplorable *just* because it means that society is not in control of its own destiny. Marx and Engels did not favour planning solely because of the particular advantageous economic consequences that they thought it would have, but also because of the significance of planning as a realisation of the idea, derived no doubt from the Hegelian legacy under which they laboured, of humanity rising to consciousness of and control over itself. The advent of the planned society was seen by Engels as 'the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom'.

In my view, that idea is entirely misplaced. Individual self-direction, a person's determining the course of his own life, may have value *per se*, but collective self-direction does not. (Except in the here totally irrelevant sense of non-subjection to another collective. Not

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wanting your society's course to be deliberately determined from without does not imply wanting it to be deliberately determined from within). Collective self-direction is not the same thing as democracy, for a democracy can decide that some things should not be subjected to collective purpose. A decision is democratic if it is made (in some appropriate sense) by the people as a whole. But there is conscious social purpose in a social development if that development was planned, decided by society as such, whatever the political character of the society may be, democratic, dictatorial, or something else. A dictator can plan, and a democracy can decide not to.

Now, unlike collective self-direction, democracy *is* good in itself. The case for it, if one is a principled democrat, is not exhausted by the claim that it produces better results. One can believe that, even if A was the wrong decision, and B would have been a better one, it says something for A that it was taken democratically. By contrast, I would not say about bad things caused by planning: well, at least they were planned. So, to the extent that something is democratic, it is good, but it is false that, to the extent that something is planned or controlled, it is good.

We should decide what to put within, and what to leave outside, collective purpose, on a purely instrumental basis, that is, according to the tendency of collective action to promote or frustrate intrinsic values, such as freedom, equality, community and democracy itself, none of which require, *per se*, the collective pursuit of essentially collective goals. There is harm to no one in the *mere* fact that social purpose is lacking, though society-wide decision-making is of course required for instrumental reasons, such as, sometimes, to promote individual freedom, and in order to suppress or control the evil aspects of the market, two of which relate to two traditional criticisms of the market which seem to me to be unanswerable.

Those criticisms are (3) that the market distributes in unjustly unequal amounts, about which enough has been said earlier in this lecture, and (4) that it motivates contribution not on the basis of commitment to one's fellow human beings and a desire to serve them while being served *by* them, but on the basis of impersonal cash reward. The immediate motive to productive activity in a market society is usually some mixture of greed and fear, in proportions that vary with the details of a person's market position. In greed, other people are seen as possible sources of enrichment, and in fear they are seen as threats. These are horrible ways of seeing other people, however much we have become habituated and inured to them, as a result of centuries of capitalist development.

Now, the history of the twentieth century encourages the thought that the easiest way to generate productivity in a modern society is by nourishing the motives of greed and fear, in a hierarchy of unequal income. That does not make them attractive motives, and the fact that

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the first great experiment in running a modern economy without relying on avarice and anxiety has failed, disastrously, is not a good reason for giving up the attempt, forever. Philosophers least of all should join the contemporary choruses of dirge and hosanna whose common refrain is that the socialist project is over. I am sure that it has a long way to go yet, and it is part of the mission of philosophy to explore unanticipated possibilities.

What is true and, as the interest in market socialism shows, widely appreciated, is that different ways forward must now be tried. And in the light of the misallocating propensity of comprehensive planning on the one hand and of the injustice of market results and the moral shabbiness of market motivation on the other, it is natural to ask whether it might be possible to preserve the allocative function of the market, to continue to get the benefits it provies of information generation and processing, while extinguishing its normal motivational presuppositions and distributive consequences.

Such a project of differentiation is the aspiration of a ground-breaking book by the American political theorist Joseph Carens, who is now at the University of Toronto. The book is called *Equality, Moral Incentives, and the Market*, and its significant sub-title is *An Essay in Utopian Politico-Economic Theory*. Carens describes a society in which what looks like standard capitalist market organizes economic activity, but the tax system cancels the disequalizing results of that market by redistributing income to complete equality. There are (pre-tax) profit-maximizing capitalists, and workers who own no capital, *but* people acknowledge an obligation to serve others, and the extent to which they discharge it is measured by how close their pre-tax income is to what it would be in the most remunerative activity available to them, while taxation effects a fully egalitarian post-tax distribution of income. Here, then, producers aim, in an immediate sense, at cash results, but they do not keep the money that accrues, and they seek it out of a desire to contribute to society.

As Carens has recognized, there are problems with the scheme, but it seems to me one that is amply worth refining. Because the Carens model is an entirely market, even captalist, society, which yet sustains both a strict equality and an ethic of mutual service, it qualifies, in a certain sense, as the Plantonic ideal of market socialism. For the inspiration of market socialism, one to which it necessarily cannot be completely true, is to seize the advantages of market competition while preserving the socialist egalitarian principle. The Carens perfection of that ideal is a star for socialist economists to steer by as they navigate the worldly problems of socialist design.

7. I turn from problems in the articulation of the socialist ideal and in the design of socialist institutions to the second dimension of renewal to which I referred at the opening of this lecture, which concerns the

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identification of the agency of socialist transformation. In connection with that problem of agency, I shall also raise issues for socialist moral philosophy that did not have to be faced in the past, but which are urgent now.

I shall begin, as with the first topic, with a few remarks about my personal placement in relation to the topic that I have just introduced. I belong, myself, to a school of thought which has been called *analytical Marxism*. In common with other partisans of this position, I am engaged by questions in moral and political philosophy which have not, in the past, attracted the attention of Marxists, and which have sometimes earned their disdain. Analytical Marxists are concerned with exactly what a commitment to equality requires, and with exactly what sort of obligations productive and talented people have to people who are relatively unproductive, or handicapped, or in special need. We seek a precise definition of exploitation, and we want to know exactly why it is wrong.

What explains this novel involvement, novel, that is, for Marxists, or even—for it might be more accurate to call us this—for semi-Marxists? I believe that the shift of attention is explained by profound changes in the class structure of Western capitalist societies, changes which raise normative problems which did not exist before, or, rather, which previously had little political significance. Those normative problems have great political significance now.

As a way into the normative problems, I shall begin by quoting from the second verse of 'Solidarity Forever', an old American socialist song:

> It is we who ploughed the prairies, built the cities where they trade,
> Dug the mines and built the workshops, endless miles of railroad laid;
> Now we stand outcast and starving, 'mid the wonders we have made...

The part of that verse on which I here invite focus is the couplet: 'Now we stand outcast and starving, 'mid the wonders we have made'. This song was sung not only by revolutionary communists but also by left social democrats whose socialist aspiration did not go beyond a demand for welfare state provision in a capitalism that, initially, did nothing for those who were thrown out of work in hard times. As 'Solidarity Forever' suggests, the struggle for the welfare state was seen as a struggle for basic minima for *working* people in particular: public provision was regarded as a modest rectification of the wrongs done to labour with respect to the product of its own activity, its products being the wonders it had made. In 'Solidarity Forever', the outcast and starving people who need the welfare state are the very people who created the wealth of society. Compare the famous

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American lamentation of the nineteen-thirties, 'Buddhy, Can You Spare a Dime'. The man says 'Once I built a railroad, made it run. . . . once I built a tower, up to the sun . . .' and those creations are supposed to show that he should have at least a dime.

In the lines of those songs, people do not demand relief from starvation on the ground that they cannot produce but on the ground that they have produced and should therefore not be left to starve. Two claims to recompense, need and entitlement through labour, are fused, in a fashion typical of the old socialist rhetoric, in the 'Solidarity' couplet. It was possible to fuse such claims at the time when the song was written because socialists saw the set of exploited producers as roughly coterminous with the set of those who needed the welfare state's benefits. Accordingly, they did not sense any conflict between the producer entitlement doctrine implied by the second part of the couplet ('Mid the wonders we have made') and the more egalitarian doctrine suggested in the first part ('Now, we stand outcast and starving'), when it is read on its own. For it does not require much argument to show that there is indeed a difference of principle between the appeals in the two parts of the couplet. Starving people are not necessarily people who have produced what starving people need, and, if what people produce belongs of right to them, the people who have produced it, then starving people who have not produced it have no claim on it. The old image of the working class, as a set of people who *both* make the wealth *and* don't have it, conceals, in its fusion of those characteristics, the poignant and problematic truth that the two claims to sustenance, namely, 'I made this and I should therefore have it' and 'I need this, I will die or wither if I do not get it' are not only different but potentially contradictory pleas.

That they created the wonders and that they were outcast and starving were two of four characteristics which communists perceived in the working class in the heyday of the communist movement. The four features never belonged to any single set of people any where, but there used to be enough convergence among them for an impression of their coincidence to be sustainable, given a dose of enthusiasm and a bit of self-deception. The communist impression of the working class was that its members

1. constituted the majority of society
2. produced the wealth of society
3. were the exploited people in society, and
4. were the needy people in society.

There were, moreover, in the same impression, two further characteristics consequent on those four. The workers were *so* needy that they

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5. would have nothing to lose from revolution, whatever its upshot might be

and, because of 1, 2 and 5, it was within the capacity (1,2) and in the interest (5) of the working class to change society, so that it

6. could and would transform society.

We can use these names to denote the six features: *majority, production, exploitation, need, nothing-to-lose,* and *revolution.*

Many of the present problems of socialist theory, and of socialist and communist parties, reflect the increasing lack of coincidence of the first four characteristics. Of special relevance here is the coming apart of the exploitation and need features. It forces a choice between the principle of a right to the product of one's labour embedded in the doctrine of exploitation and a principle of equality of benefits and burdens which negates the right to the product of one's labour and which is required to defend support for very needy people who are not producers and who are, *a fortiori*, not exploited.

If you can get yourself to believe that the features cohere, you then have a very powerful political posture.[3] You can say to democrats that they should really be socialists, because workers form the immense majority of the population. You can say the same to humanitarians, because workers suffer tremendous need. And, very importantly, you are under less pressure than you otherwise would be to worry about the exact ideals and principles of socialism, and that is so for two reasons. The first is that, when the features are seen to cohere, several kinds of moral principle will justify a struggle for socialism, and there is then no practical urgency about identifying which principle or principles are essential: from a practical point of view, such discussion will appear unnecessary, and a waste of political energy. And the second reason for not worrying too much about principles, when the features (seem to) cohere, is that you do not then need to recruit people to the socialist cause by articulating principles which will draw them to it: success of the cause is guaranteed, by the majority, production, and nothing-to-lose features.

It is partly because there is now patently no group that has those features and, therefore, the revolution feature that Marxists, or what were Marxists, are increasingly impelled to enter normative political philosophy. The disintegration of the characteristics produces an intellectual need to philosophize which is related to a political need to be clear as never before about values and principles, for the sake of socialist advocacy. Normative socialist advocacy is less necessary when the features coincide. You do not have to justify a socialist transformation as a matter of principle when people are driven to make it by the urgencies of their situation, and in a good position to succeed.

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Each of characteristics 1–4 is now the leading motif in a certain kind of left-wing or post-left-wing politics in Britain. First, there is (what is sometimes called *rainbow*) majority politics, adopted by socialists who recognize the disintegration and look to generate a majority for social change out of heterogeneous elements: badly paid workers, the unemployed, oppressed races, people oppressed because of their gender or their sexual preference, neglected old people, single-parent families and so forth. A producer politics with reduced emphasis on exploitation characterized the Harold Wilsonian rhetoric of 1964 which promised a melting away of reactionary British structures in the 'white heat' of a technological transformation of the country in which an alliance of proletarian and highly educated producers would overcome the power of city and landed and other drones. Producer politics projects a Saint-Simonian alliance of workers and high-tech producers with greater emphasis on the parasitism of those who do not produce than on the exploitation of those who do (since some of the high fliers who fall within the Saint-Simonian inclusion could hardly be regarded as exploited). An exploitation politics, with a degree of pretence that the other features are still there, characterizes various forms of obsolescent Scargillian labourism. And, finally, there is the need-centred politics of welfare rights action, a politics of those who think that suffering has the first claim on radical energy and who devote it to new organizations such as Shelter, the Child Poverty Action Group, Age Concern, and the panoply of groups which confront world-wide deprivation, hunger, and injustice. Such organizations did not exist when the disintegration was less advanced and the labour movement and the welfare movement were pretty well identical. (Philanthropic activity on behalf of deprived children, the homeless and the indigent old long predates the founding of the organizations named above, but they pursue their aims in a new spirit, not the old one of providing charity but a new spirit of rectifying injustice; injustice, moreover, which cannot be brought under the concept of exploitation).

When those who suffer dire need can be conceived as coinciding with, or as a subset of, the exploited working class, then the socialist doctrine of exploitation does not cause much difficulty for the socialist principle of distribution according to need. But, once the really needy and the exploited producers cease to coincide, then the Marxist doctrine of exploitation is flagrantly incongruent with even the minimal principle of the welfare state. There are, accordingly, tasks set for socialist political philosophy that did not have to be addressed in the past, just as there are tasks for socialist economists that were not envisaged when there still prevailed a naive faith in economic planning.

There is no recipe for identifying an agency for socialism that can rival what the proletariat once appeared to offer. We have to settle for something less, and for more moral advocacy than used to be

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fashionable. But there is a feature of the new situation which brings a demand for equality to the fore on an entirely new and, as we shall see, a paradoxical, basis.[4]

The new basis of a demand for equality relates to the ecological crisis, which, perhaps uniquely in the history of our species, is a crisis for the whole of humanity. The scale of the crisis is necessarily a matter of controversy, and so is the shape of the remedy, if, indeed, it is not too late to speak of a remedy. But, although there are hard controversial questions, two propositions seem to me to be beyond dispute: that the crisis is large and immediate, and that the remedy requires a radical change of life-style, in the direction of much less consumption than the mean in Western industrial countries. Western living standards, measured in terms of energy and resource consumption, have to fall, drastically.

Now, when living standards are generally rising, it is relatively easy for those at the bottom of the rising wave to tolerate the gap between themselves and those at the top. Under those circumstances, the various ideologies which endorse inequality have their uses, but they are not necessary to sustain acceptance of inequality. The ideologies are not really required because the alternative to acceptance of inequality is so costly in commitment, energy and blood that it is a better bet, in terms of their living standards in the foreseeable future, for the relative have-nots to accept inequality in the context of economic progress than to disrupt that progress for the sake of equality. But, when progress must give way to regress, when material living standards must fall, on pain of the extinction of the race, then no ideology, so I hazard, will reconcile poor people, and poor *nations*, to continuing huge disparities of wealth and amenity. And, if ideology will not serve to maintain inequality together with social and international peace, then, as far as I can see, there are only two possible scenarios. In one, inequality is maintained, even as living standards fall, through the application of brute force. In the second, coercion is less necessary, or, at any rate, less coercion is necessary, because the drop in general standards goes with a softening of inequality and a raising, even in the context of the general drop, of the condition of life of the worst off people. And then liberalism, whose relationship to equality has always been ambiguous, liberalism, with its huge arsenal of ideology and sentiment must stand, unambiguously, for the first time, on the side of equality, for the alternative to equality is the coercion which liberalism condemns.

But I said that this new basis for the demand for equality has a paradoxical aspect, and I shall close by explaining what it is.

Recall the slogan characterizing the full consummation of Marxist communism: from each according to his ability, to each according to his need. That is the most egalitarian conception that has even been devised, and one may wonder how so hard-headed a thinker as Marx

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could have not only hoped but expected such a society to supervene. The answer lies in his belief that industrial progress would bring society to a condition of such fluent abundance that there would be no scope for inegalitarian competition, there would be no conflict between satisfying anyone's needs and satisfying those of anyone else's.

We can no longer sustain Marx's pre-green materialist optimism. We have to give up that vision. But, if I am right about the narrow choices posed by the ecological crisis, we also have to give up a pessimism about *social* possibility which was background to Marx's optimism about *material* possibility. For Marx thought that material abundance was not only a sufficient but also a necessary condition of equality. He thought that anything short of an abundance so fluent that it removes all major conflicts of interest would guarantee continued social strife, a 'struggle for necessities . . . and all the old filthy business'. It was because he was so uncompromisingly pessimistic about the social consequences of anything less than limitless abundance that Marx needed to be so optimistic about the possibility of that abundance.

Because we cannot share Marx's optimism about material possibility, we also cannot share his pessimism, the pessimism about social possibility, if we wish to sustain a vision in which humanity faces a tolerable future. We cannot rely on technology to fix things for us: we have to fix them ourselves. So the paradox is that, while the most developed form of socialist thought, Marxism, saw equality resting on abundance, we have to seek equality in the context, and under the stimulus, of scarcity. That recognition must govern the future efforts of socialist economists and philosophers.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 This essay concatenates part of 'The Future of a Disillusion' (which appeared in *New Left Review*, and in James Hopkins and Anthony Savile (eds.), *Psychoanalysis, Mind, and Art: Perspectives on Richard Wollheim*, London, 1992) and 'Marxism and Contemporary Political Philosophy' (which appeared in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Supp. Vol. No. 16, 1990). Much less than half of each of those articles appears here, all but one of the original footnotes have been omitted, and a good deal of text has been added.

2 My discussion is largely restricted to Western capitalist society, not because other societies matter less, but because that is what I know something about.

3 That posture is struck in 'Solidarity Forever', which brings all of the features together, and whose verses run as follows:
When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run,
There can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun;
Yet what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one,
For the union makes us strong.
It is we who ploughed the prairies, built the cities where they trade,
Dug the mines and built the workshops, endless miles of railroad laid;
Now we stand outcast and starving, 'mid the wonders we have made,
But the union makes us strong.

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They have taken untold millions that they never toiled to earn,
But without our brain and muscle not a single wheel can turn;
We can break their haughty power, gain our freedom when we learn
That the union makes us strong.

In our hands is placed a power greater than their hoarded gold,
Greater than the might of atoms magnified a thousand fold;
We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old,
For the union makes us strong.

Feature 1, that the workers constitute the majority of society, is not explicitly affirmed, but it is surely implied as part of the explanation of the immense potential power of the working class asserted in the first, third and fourth stanzas. The other part of the explanation of that power is that the workers are the producers, as the second stanza, and the all-important second line of the third, assure us. The feature of exploitation is apparent in the first line of the third stanza, and the third line of the second indicates how utterly deprived the workers are, no doubt on such a scale that the fifth feature (nothing-to-lose) obtains. As for the revolution feature, the third lines of each of the last two verses, and the second of the first, imply that the workers *can* change society, and it is clearly part of the message of the whole song that they will.

4 The material that follows is less thought through than what has been presented thus far. I am sure it will need to be changed, substantially, after it has received the criticism it deserves, and I hereby request such criticism.

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