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WHAT WAS SOCIALISM

AND WHY WE WILL ALL MISS IT SO MUCH

BY NORMAN RUSH

"At dawn, armed with burning patience, we shall enter the splendid cities."

~ ARTHUR RIMBAUD

Given its stupendous implications, the assisted suicide of actually existing socialism from 1989 to 1991 has called forth an oddly defecient intellectual reaction from intelligent onlookers and professional commentators in the West. Many of the larger if subtler aftereffects are going unremarked.

Mainstream comment has been predictably self-congratulatory and has focused narrowly on questions like which late-stage influence (the strategems of the Polish Pope, the communications revolution, the Star Wars budgets) did the trick, or which Sovietologists have the best claim to be counted among those least amazed by the abruptness and scale of the debacle.

On the Left — and I do mean the chartered antitotalitarian Left, a persistent impulse has been to show that the socialist project, deformed and betrayed though it was in the Russian model and its clones, is still somehow salvageable. This sentiment, doggedly appended to declarations of relief that the cold war is over, yields two main contentions. The first is that greater and timelier infusions of democracy might have saved Russian socialism. The second, a cloudier thing, is that because the continuing structural imperfections of capitalism are so alarming, a socialist option just has to be viable.

But it really is over for socialism. I don't take any pleasure in it, but for a long time, my attitude toward socialism has been something like Houdini's toward spiritualism. He wanted the afterlife to be real, and he wanted mediums to be who they said they were. But the more he probed and tested, the more disenchanted he became and the more keenly he felt the impulsion to publish his unhappiness. I feel close to him.

The truth is that *wherever* it has achieved practical expression, socialism is finished. While our attention has been fixed on the spectacular demolition derbies taking place in Russia, China, Cuba and Eastern Europe, in the background another long-running sequence of socialist defeats is winding up. To remain afloat, nominally socialist and social-democratic parties in Europe and elsewhere jettison what used to be the basic objectives of socialism and offer programs ever more finely attuned to the imperatives of mature capitalism. Most now support the reprivatization of industries nationalized in more heroic times at their own urging. (No sooner had Mikhail Gorbachev announced his intention to remake the Soviet Union along Swedish lines than that particular demi-socialist model went, in effect, bankrupt.) Membership in trade unions, those flagship institutions of the former socialist political culture, is collapsing. Guerrilla socialism in Latin America is aggressively de-Marxifying itself. As for the enclave microsocialisms like the kibbutzim in Israel, the *ejido* collectives in Mexico, the Yugoslav self-managed industrial sector — whose existence provided a fallback hope for Left idealists that a redeemed form of nonstate socialism might someday arise — all are in serious, perhaps terminal, difficulty.

But what was socialism? It's necessary to be clear about this because popular conceptions of socialism are becoming so approximate, based as they so commonly are on nostalgic afterimages of failed socialist societies or on outright caricatures produced by the victors. For the young, especially, socialism is rapidly receding into the category of anciently powerful social concepts now needing a lot of contextualizing, like the phlogiston theory, the divine right of kings, the vaginal orgasm.

What socialism was supposed to be was not at all clear to the creators of actually existing socialism when the moment

came to enact it in Russia. There are no blueprints for a working socialist society in Marx or Engels. Engels was especially offhand, writing in one connection that the Shaker village presented a good idea of what a future socialist society would resemble — minus the religion, of course. When it came to realizing socialism, it was all improvisation. In retrospect, probably the single most influential anticipation of actual socialism was to be found in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, in which the state was conceived as a corporation from which each citizen-member would receive an equal share of annual production.

At the core of the socialist project, of course, is the demand for material equality. Equality is the primary commodity socialist economies are supposed to produce. Collective ownership of the sources of wealth would, obviously, confer on everybody the right to an equal share of the total social product (or a share as equal as the temporary limitations of an economy only part of the way toward ultimate abundance would permit). This was the pure notion at the center of socialism, and its purity would remain unstained in the minds of believers despite the awkward fact that so many opportunists, thugs and incompetents won out in the struggle to

become top dogs in the societies constructed around it, and despite the emerging realization that *deferred* equality began to look suspiciously like the permanent norm in those societies.

The strength of socialism as an ideology lay in its claim to dissolve inequality through a simple change in social format. What ensued was the great contest between socialism, with its sovereign game (Equality First), and capitalism, whose own sovereign game was a little different: the point being to protect and extend an economic game in which some unknown proportion of the cleverest, fastest and luckiest in each generation will have a crack at being filthy rich. This is a game that has self-evident appeal for the elite, and also for the much larger class of potential 2nd- and 3rd-prize winners, although it carries grievous penalties for the losers in the game, whose numbers go up during the bad times the system is fated to undergo. In any case, socialism began the contest with certain ancillary advantages. It was widely seen as representing the next upward stage in social evolution and as an apotheosis of applied science. It was also argued that socialist nations, unlike imperialistic capitalist ones, would have no reason to make war on one another. For all those reasons, socialism captured the allegiance of many among the thoughtful and the downtrodden.

Repugnance for inequality is a determining characteristic of modern oppositional intellectuality. None of the great liberal revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries substantially undid inequality — not the destruction of monarchy, not the uprooting of the privileges of the church, not the establishment of ever more representative forms of government. The vexation of inequality continued. Some further step had to be taken. And since socialism promised that inequality was, mechanically, eliminable, that step seemed to be socialism. Now the Enlightenment agenda could be completed. When, at length, a kind of socialism came into being and then developed into the nightmare authoritarian form called communism, many intellectual partisans had to defect. But even as the conscientious defectors denounced communism, they typically restated their firm belief in the underlying value of socialism.

The above is hardly an original *precis* of this particular stretch of our intellectual history, but it does serve to clarify a crucial continuity in the intellectual life of our time. A tenacious, confused attachment to the ingenuous

BEYOND LEFT & RIGHT

BY DAVID HOROWITZ

With the de-evolution of global communism and the waning of the cold war, Americans may be facing an historic juncture as significant as the one confronted by the Populists one hundred years earlier. As the late Christopher Lasch noted, terms like fascism and socialism "no longer describe historical alternatives at the end of the 20th century." As early as 1971 the political journalist William Pfaff sensed the rush of new ideas and movements "outside the established categories of both *Left* and *Right*." Post-Cold War preoccupations with American domestic life present a fresh opportunity to reconceptualize the political map and redefine its parameters. Yet vast economic changes in the past two decades have produced sharp social tensions and an enervating disillusionment with politics and government. Such developments have prompted Thomas Edsall to call for a refashioned "insurgency" built on "recognizably legitimate claims for an equal opportunity to participate and to compete."

Edsall's emphasis on equality of opportunity may be a compelling return to the populist strands of American political culture. Nevertheless, a historical consideration of the nation's insurgent legacy suggests a series of questions for those seeking to revitalize it. Future insurgents first must answer those who argue that populist concern for the traditional past often promotes ideological rigidity, narrow provincialism, and bellicose forms of ethnic and patriotic pride. Can Americans learn to equate cultural pluralism with equality of opportunity? Can participation in a diverse global market be reconciled to spiritual identification with locality and a national culture? Will loyalty to the nation-state prevent an insurgent politics from embracing multinational efforts to solve global economic or military challenges? Can the passionate emotional ties associated with insurgence and populism lend themselves to rational problem-solving and perspective?

A second area of inquiry deals with the relationship of future insurgents to institutionalized power. What are the roles of small enterprise and large corporations in American society and how are the consequences of market risk and failure to be

absorbed? What is the legitimate place of centralized government in a complex and multilayered social and economic environment? Can government act to promote democratic opportunities for ordinary Americans while protecting marketplace and constitutional rights for competitors? What role do professional experts play in the articulation of social challenges and can ordinary people be empowered to participate in consideration of such issues?

Third, how will insurgents address challenges presented by social class? Can populist politics respond to the impact of technological specialization and selective computer literacy on equal opportunity and the growth of a dysfunctional underclass? Can the American dream of equitably distributed wealth coexist with market freedoms and the requirements of investors and independent entrepreneurs? How are the potential economic losses associated with global competition and environmental protection to be allocated democratically? What specific reforms can meet the desire of ordinary citizens for justice, equity and opportunity without producing systemic favoritism or problems more vexing than the original challenges?

A portrait of 20th century American politics that highlights the confrontation between an insurgent impulse and the established order may not fit all circumstances. Yet it may prove far more useful than an antiquated "right or left" model. The most central American political debates of the last one hundred years were not contests between *liberals* and *conservatives*. If the next century is to produce a vital American politics that defends ordinary citizens against undue concentrations of power and pursues reachable goals of justice and fair play, it likely will be one that moves beyond left and right.

David Horowitz teaches history at Portland State University. His article is excerpted from his recently written book *Beyond Left and Right: America's Insurgent Voice and the Established Order, 1892-1992*.