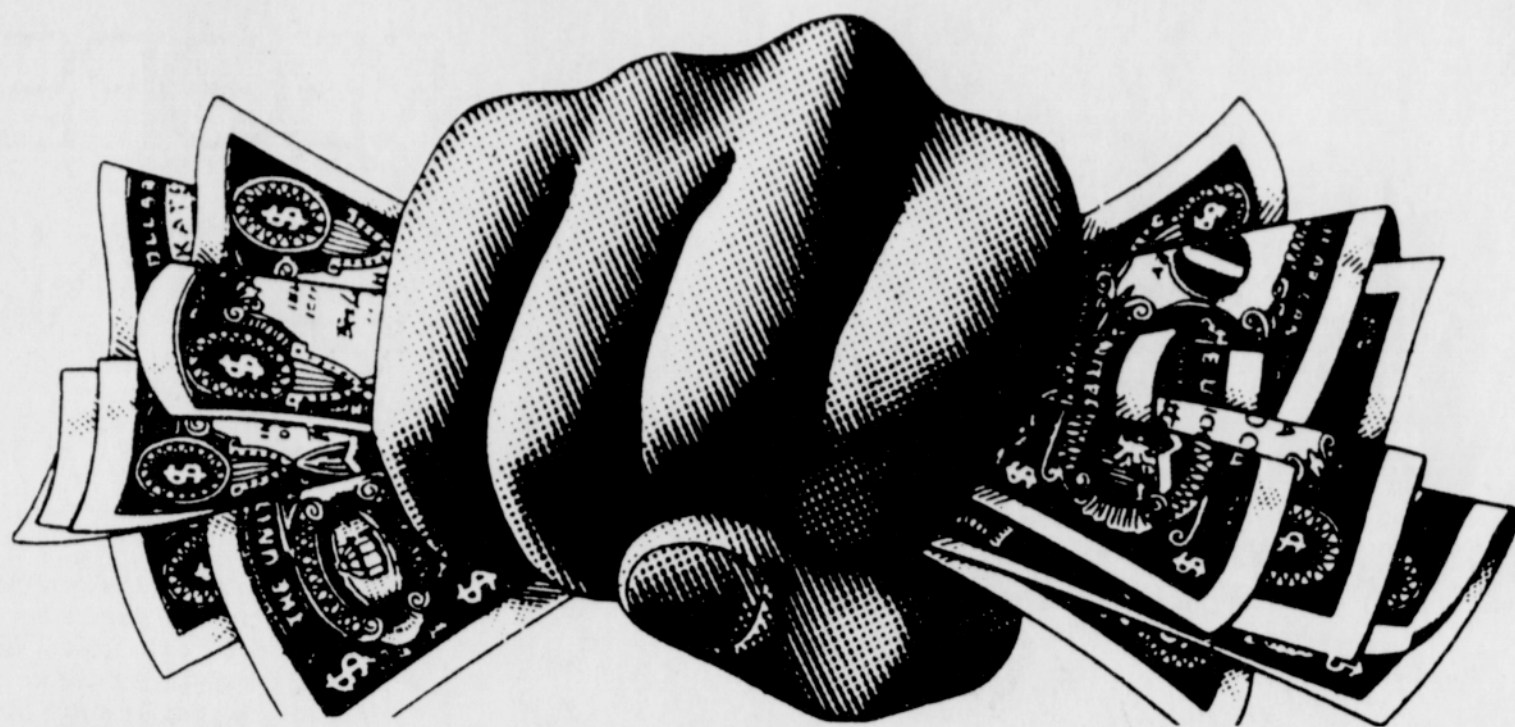


Has Capitalism Won?



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predicate at the heart of socialism — equality through mandated common ownership — is subtly shaping the broad Left's response to the present debacle.

It is impossible here to enter the disputation about what was the exact mix of factors (intrinsic versus extrinsic) that produced the debacle. In any event, neither the left-hand path of revolution nor the right-hand path of elections led ultimately to a model of socialism that was competitive with capitalism, for many reasons. Historical bad timing, war, the inventiveness and energy and productivity of the capitalist alternative, military and diplomatic pressure and dirty tricks — all contributed to the outcome. And, clearly, the prospects for socialists trying to win elections were damaged everywhere as actually existing socialism evolved so grotesquely. But, at bottom, the fact is that large economic systems designed for the advertised purpose of securing material equality through bureaucratic command structures could not, in a real-world ecology dominated by robust, expansionist capitalism, hope to succeed. Capitalism and socialism both have their contradictions, and it may turn out that socialism's contradictions just happened to be fatal first.

But socialism's contradictions are genuine and severe, and they have manifested themselves whether socialism constituted itself as an empire, a nation, an enclave system, a firm or an intentional community — from Comecon to Brook Farm. Even in socialisms imagined — via thought experiment — as freestanding autarkies, these contradictions can be detected. Over time, two inevitable tendencies develop within socialism: one toward dissolution through racalcitrant, re-emergent possessive individualism; the other toward costly, coercive suppression of such impulses. There is a vast and agnostic scholarly literature on the feasibility of socialism, and one mordant classic, Janos Kornai's *The Socialist System*.

The socialist experiment is over and the capitalist experiment roars to its own conclusion. For the first time in 150 years, artists, writers, poets and other unacknowledged legislators, along with the policy classes, endure the acceleration of history as tenants of a system to which no serious alternative exists. This is a poignant moment for the progressive bulk of the contemporary intellectual community. The traditional religious critique of inequality was long ago undermined for an increasingly secularized intelligentsia because it derived from untrue, if picturesque, notions about the constitution of humankind (siblinghood under God the Father), but also because of the inadequacy of the standard religious remedy for inequality — charity. Socialism proved a plausible, and blessedly secular, vessel for the passion for social justice. At the same time, it offered community, meaning and even the premium of surrogate immortality — a premium due every member in good standing of the grand, inevitable movement toward a redemptive futurity. Despite what it had become, the Soviet model functioned subliminally for many as a depository for the mummy wheat of true socialism. And, maddeningly, inequality persisted and worsened.

Certain questions of morale arise, post-debacle. There are cultural aftereffects. Here's a sampling of the more arresting ones:

~ *Public political discourse, such as it is.* The Left exits the scene, but the center moves right as the Right goes bananas. In this country the Right apparently needed the Left so badly for purposes of self-definition that it has, in its craving for polarity, fabricated a faux Left out of bemused, hapless, centrist liberalism. The "L" word, "femmunist," taxation-as-expropriation — it's all over rightwing talk radio and on the lips of recent rightwing Presidents. The poor are redefined as a "special interest." The center, disorganized by the strange accusations it's receiving, and lacking any prospect of defensive coalition with noticeable Left entities, moves to appease its persecutors. Left policy proposals shrink in number and scope, and even when supported by the broadest array of forces the Left can muster (as in the anti-NAFTA, single-payer, anti-

GATT campaigns), fare badly. With the Left contributing so feebly, the pool of policy options contracts. Policy makers feel the pinch.

~ *Artists & models.* The importance that a plausible socialist model had for the premier vanguard artists and writers of the modern tradition can hardly be overstated. Rimbaud writes a constitution for a proposed socialist state; Virginia Woolf takes the minutes for her local branch of the Labor Party; Robert Bly writes in *Z Magazine* in 1992, "I remain a Leftist." In an unconscious valedictory to this continuing, if dilute, affiliation, Allan Gurganus asks an audience, "Can anybody here name one major novelist who's a registered Republican?"

In strong and subtle ways, the belief in the attainability of a morally correct alternative society served to

authorize avant-garde art as a calling. The avant-garde art product would contribute to the consciousness that could be expected to demand socialism. For the artist, this vision compensated for the risk of poverty that vanguard art entailed, and gave energy to the explicit social criticism contained in so much of modern art.

Things have been changing in the realm of the arts for some time, and some of these changes are interpretable as lagged effects of the decline of the socialist ethos. Post-debacle, one might anticipate an intensification of tendencies like these: more and more implicit religious advocacy in serious fiction, more pastiche, more decor for decor's sake in the graphic arts, heightened careerism ("Bohemia is for losers"), the pursuit of "liberation" through aesthetic explorations of sociopathy and brutality.

~ *Moral infrastructure.* Men and women who believed in socialism were responsible for creating much of the moral infrastructure of modern capitalist society. Their legacy is everywhere: trade unions, credit unions, the 8-hour day, child-labor laws, the right to conscientious objection, civil rights legislation, the varieties of social insurance, legal and accessible birth control. Major pieces of this moral infrastructure are under attack. Who will be troubled to protect and replace them? Which forces?

"Socialism is the name of my desire," Tolstoy wrote. And that was right. Because the conditions under which broadscale socialism might conceivably be achieved are so specialized and unlikely to eventuate, socialism is not a serious proposition. It's the name of a wish, not a destination. To assert that you're a socialist is like wearing a badge that says "I Care." Wearing this badge is harmless enough — unless that becomes a substitute for hard thought about how the reform impulse must now express itself and about what it can achieve in an environment in the deepening grip of a triumphalist, absolutist capitalism.

Contriving an effective post-socialist critique of contemporary capitalism will be uphill work. The political and religious Right, stigmatizing anything that it sees as endangering its version of the status quo, is sealing off large areas of discussion. The xenophobes of the ultra-Right, with their murderous, numbskull, irrelevant propositions, are ready to come into the parlor, as they're doing in recession-struck Europe today, and not only there. *Schadenfreude* — or denial — will limit the willingness of many socialist thinkers to participate. But that such a critique is imperative — in the context of an expanding capitalism with a built-in drive to evade civil controls — is beyond dispute.

A new practical and ethical critique of actually existing capitalism will arrive piecemeal. It will necessarily be *ad hoc*, crisis-oriented, pragmatic, pluralistic in its sources. It will lack an overarching ideal. It will not amount to a repainted liberalism — a doctrine in the process of surrendering the last vestige of its oppositional character. It will be ungainly and will involve some competing, unlovely propositions. My unstartling prediction is that the new critique will be shaped predominantly by deepening fear over the environmental destructiveness of rampant capitalism, and by a spreading determination to resist it. The critique will be a collation put together by people moved to thought and action by the wide variety of shocks late capitalism can be counted on to deliver as it organizes the whole world to its liking. On the Left, it used to be a terrible thing to be called a reformist, so the waning of socialism as a reference belief may have an advantage or two. Socialism wasn't exactly helpful when it came to discussions of population control, and social analysts devoted an inordinate amount of time to proving to the faithful, at each trough in the business cycle, that capitalism was about to self-destruct. Nevertheless, the builders of the new critique will suffer from the absence of any foundational conceit as neat and glittering as the one socialism provided. (Persistent strife between the main factions in the Green movement to date suggests how difficult reaching useful consensus in these matters will be.) For those intending to confront the contradictions of capitalism unhandicapped, there will be a novel requisite: Forget socialism, now. It's going to be very post-modern in the terrain where socialists used to browse.

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VILLAINS, VICTIMS & THE OCA

There is little doubt that economic dislocations in the timber industry and agriculture have contributed to the strength of the Oregon Citizens Alliance in the 1980s and 1990s. These economic factors certainly contribute to the OCA's popularity in the state's hinterland and explain its recent entry into landuse politics. Yet, such analysis fails to suggest why the movement's main targets — homosexual and abortion rights, public school sex education and relativist social mores — all touch the upon the realm of sexual politics.

Proponents of cultural diversity argue that OCA crusades to remove homosexuality as a civil right amount to a form of racial hatred that will ultimately be applied to Jews, blacks, Hispanics and others. Yet, the OCA claims that the "homosexual lifestyle" is a matter of cultural choice, not a matter of birth, and like its anti-Catholic predecessors, courts former adversaries who have converted. Racist models do not help to understand the OCA. Instead, historians might point out that homophobia has distinct class ramifications, some of which date back to the sexual exploitation of peasant youth by predatory European nobles of past centuries. Like the Freemasons of the 19th century, homosexuals long have been associated with a perceived decadence among privileged urban elites. A projected homosexual "promiscuity" seems to have become a convenient symbol and scapegoat for late-20th century Americans who fear a loss of control over the erosion of life-defining values and personal discipline.

Such *valuecentric* behavior appears more explainable when we look at the dominance of a metropolitan culture in which the work and lifestyles of corporate professionals and technicians accent scientific rationalism, secular codes and personal consumerism. These new allegiances easily are equated with rejection of spiritual traditions embracing individual decency, respect for life, and concern for women, children, families and local communities. The emotional debates over feminism, homosexuality, abortion and euthanasia in the 1990s do not simply involve questions of personal rights. Instead, they are philosophic fissures over the boundaries of life, death, social obligation and meaning, and involve bitter disputes as to who is privileged to set them.

The postmodernists have taught us that power is often defined as the ability to dominate discourse. Historians must appreciate that the ability to dictate social symbols is a form of political power. Yet, not all groups succeed at the task. Perhaps we need to understand that social activists who resort to sexual imagery are probably the most powerless, not the most powerful, among us. We must learn to explore the full social context of the cultural and political movements we study. I suggest that this task cannot be fully accomplished without abandoning two time-worn strictures of academic analysis: the political division between "left and right" and the requirement that cultural narratives distinguish between victims and villains.

Old paradigms never fade away; they just repeat themselves to death. Yet groups like the OCA defy stale analysis and will continue to thrive unless understood by their adversaries.

--DAVID HOROWITZ

This article has been reprinted from the Portland State VANGUARD.

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