

THE LEFT NEEDS MORE SOCIALISM

BY RONALD ARONSON

It's time to break a taboo and place the word "socialism" across the top of the page in a major American progressive magazine. Time for the left to stop repressing the side of ourselves that the right finds most objectionable. Until we thumb our noses at the Democratic pols who have been calling the shots and reassert the very ideas they say are unthinkable, we will keep stumbling around in the dark corners of American politics, wondering how we lost our souls — and how to find them again.

I can hear tongues clucking the conventional wisdom that the "S" word is the kiss of death for any American political initiative. Since the collapse of communism, hasn't "socialism" — even the democratic kind — reeked of everything obsolete and discredited? Isn't it sheer absurdity to ask today's mainstream to pay attention to this 19th century idea? Didn't Tony Blair reshape "New Labour" into a force capable of winning an unprecedented string of victories in Britain only by first defeating socialism and socialists in his party? And for a generation haven't we on the American left declared socialist ideology irrelevant time and again in the process of shaping our feminist, antiwar, progay, antiracist, multicultural, ecological and community-oriented identities?

People who espouse these and a dozen other arguments against the relevance of socialism today may regard it as quaint that Bolivia's new president, Evo Morales, leads the Movement Toward Socialism Party, or that Venezuela's Hugo Chávez intends to create a "new socialism for the 21st century." After all, socialist parties elsewhere, such as in France, Spain and Germany, or indeed Brazil's Workers Party and Chile's Socialist Party, have no intention of introducing anything like socialism in their countries. Still, the newest significant formation, indeed, today's equivalent of the 19th century International Workingman's Association, calls itself the World Social Forum. The name reminds those who believe "another world is possible" that it can come about only if it is global, only if it is guided by a loosely organized "forum" rather than a top-down party — and only if its character is social.

Among Americans it has long since become obvious that the left is doomed without a vision, a sense of direction and an effective call to arms. One of the reasons we are having such tough sledding nowadays is that we have been unable to develop our own compelling alternative to those created by the right and the center over the past generation and embodied in the politics of George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. We need to point to a clearly different direction from the one in which the United States and the world are heading. We need to spell out a historical diagnosis and project, a strategy and tactics, and root these in widely shared ultimate values.

We would be further along on all of these fronts today had it not been for the immense success of the Anglo-American right in insisting for nearly a generation now, that in Margaret Thatcher's words, "there is no alternative," that the conservative project of free markets, privatization and deregulation is simple obedience to necessity. When Francis Fukuyama proclaimed the "end of history" 14 years ago, he ruled out picturing "to ourselves a world that is essentially different from the present one, and at the same time better." Capitalism's victory over communism in the Cold War silenced any and all alternatives, present and future, he said. And today among apologists for global capitalism like Thomas Friedman, the ideological assault on alternatives has become even more insistent, the faith in the market almost total.

Successful ideological and political campaigns close up the space in which imagination might conceive of a world different from the status quo. Alternatives become "unthinkable." In contrast, for two generations between 1917 and 1989, the prospect of social change and political action worldwide were nurtured by the competition between two different world-embracing economic systems. Ugly as it was in so many ways, the Soviet Union not only spurred imitators but stimulated and sometimes supported resistance movements, and, more relevant to us, along with the presence of vigorous socialist movements and ideas it encouraged thinking and acting toward alternatives that would be neither capitalist nor communist. The 1930s through the 1970s saw important and still relevant efforts at social change led by anarchists (Spain), social democrats (Scandinavia), non-Stalinist communists (Yugoslavia, Italy), coalitions of socialists and communists (Chile), and coalitions of leftists and less ideological forces of national liberation (Nicaragua, South Africa). Until the end of the Cold War, alternatives to capitalism and communism seemed both thinkable and possible.

Today, when the bottom line is touted as the answer to every question, Americans are imprisoned in a mental world shaped by economic trends. Ironically, its ideologists have become pitchmen for a capitalist caricature of Marxism — promulgating a crude economic determinism in which the market rules every social, mental and geographic space. Since the fall of communism, market-oriented ways of thinking, feeling and seeing have permeated our lives and our culture to a degree that Marx never dreamed of.

Yet the real Marxism, although no longer embodied in movements or governments, has never been truer or



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more relevant: Most of the world's main problems today are inseparable from the dynamics of the capitalist system itself. With corporate capitalism everywhere in command, the outlook for increased poverty, more environmental degradation, ever more uneven distribution of resources and the undermining of traditional societies and ways of life, for a culture dominated by marketing, advertising and uneven global development.

But Americans need only glance around the world to see that there are alternatives. The vibrant World Social Forums are an example, under way since 2001 and now envisioning several annual meetings of an immense variety of groups, organizations and networks. Another is the continuing leftward movement of South American governments, now adding Bolivia to Argentina, Uruguay, Venezuela, Chile and Brazil. A third is the continuing European efforts to defend social welfare programs, as evidenced in the German Social Democrats' remarkable reversal of a slide into oblivion to tie the Christian Democratic Party in last September's election, and the unflagging popular support for Britain's National Health Service.

The reigning economic system will continue to generate opposition as long as it speaks of equality (which it must) yet continues to be unequal and undemocratic (which it must); as long as it incites dreams of a better life (which it must) but deforms social, cultural and political life according to its bottom line (which it must); as long as its rampant abuse of the environment and pillage of natural resources continue (also inevitable).

Living in a capitalist world, we can't get far thinking and talking about alternatives and new directions without acknowledging that many of our key values and starting points are drawn from a common historical source: the socialist tradition. We have not reached the end of history as long as the spirit of solidarity animates antisweatshop movements, as long as a root sense of fairness motivates our efforts for a living wage, as long as the belief in equality nourishes our demand for a national healthcare system, as long as we embrace the democratic social provisioning embodied in Social Security. The next left will have to acknowledge, and even celebrate, the socialist spirit. Socialism's values continue to nourish community life. Much of our world continues to be organized collectively, democratically and socially, operating according to need and not according to profitability — in schools and cooperatives; libraries and non-profits; local, state and federal government programs. September 11 and Hurricane Katrina showed the undying need for extensive and intensive structures of community. The socialist

standards of fairness, democracy, equality and justice are as much a part of daily life as are capitalism's values of privilege, unequal rewards and power.

In this post-communist era when even "liberal" has become a dirty word, the effort to create a more humane society will not be revived without explicit demands long associated with socialism. Social movements for environmental protection, women's rights and racial equality sooner or later run up against the institutional constraints imposed by capitalism. Then they discover that they can't achieve their goals without becoming anticapitalist. What will individuals and groups demanding equality, democracy, respect for the environment and freedom from the market call themselves as they try to coalesce around increasingly global demands and on behalf of increasingly global alternatives? We need not be timid about naming this *socialism*. What else is it? What a new progressive movement needs can be simply stated: more socialism.

There can be no future social movements without key socialist themes: the importance of economic class, the centrality of labor and workers in shaping the world, the idea that people must act to create their own destiny. Not to mention themes already suggested: the decisive role of the economy in determining the rest of our life, the fact that today it is above all driven by the pursuit of profit, the insistence of freeing people from its domination and the need to think and act politically in terms of the socioeconomic system rather than in terms of individual policies. Whatever language people use, socialist ideas, experience, models, aspirations and analyses will help form the heart and soul of the alternative-in-the-making, or there will be no alternative.

Equality is the most important among these. Socialists have conceived a society that provides for the needs of every individual, including adequate means to live a decent life and develop each person's capacities. Our society, in contrast, is ambivalent and ultimately incoherent about equality. We are all said to be equal politically and before the law, but socially and economically our individual worth varies enormously. This is built into the American system: Social and economic inequality, a hallmark of life under free enterprise, make a mockery of a proud hallmark of American democracy, civic equality. In its own terms our society should be taking steps at least to insure that we are equal to become unequal. In other words, fair competition requires an equal starting point. Yet today this is not a liberal but a radical demand. Unequal schools, the rising costs of higher education, the growing gap in living conditions between well-off and poor, the abolition of the estate tax encouraging a plutocracy — all heighten the system's unfairness. In fighting against our increasingly unequal society, liberals and progressives will need to draw upon socialist thought in developing clear and consistent ideas, critiques, programs and watchwords about equality.

Doing battle against the prevailing inequality means invoking the idea that we all belong to a community, as opposed to the illusion, voiced famously by Thatcher, that "There is no society, only individuals."

The paradox of our times is that individualism is riding high even while our universal interconnectedness is intensifying in this increasingly interdependent global society. 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. We are supposed to live our lives as if there were no community, while more and more, vital social functions become performed for private gain, as if each of us had become a Robinson Crusoe.

The fantasy universe of purely private individuals, for all its lip service to religious belief, is no longer able to inculcate the basic social morality and sense of responsibility any society needs to function. Twenty-five years of attacking government has drained much of the basic civic spirit and social responsibility we must have to transact our collective business with integrity. If nothing is higher than the individual, the only thing that matters is whether I alone succeed. In the Enron and other corporate fraud scandals, in the debacle of Hurricane Katrina, the chickens have been coming home to roost.

On the road to shaping an alternative, the left might respond with a time-honored socialist insight, namely that "I" only exists within a "we," and that unless we look out for everyone, no one is secure. To say this confidently means accepting that we stand for a clear alternative and embody decisively different values and traditions than those on the right. This means getting friendly again with socialism.

Ronald Aronson wrote this article for *The Nation*. He teaches at Wayne State University. Among his books are *After Marxism* (Guilford) and *Camus & Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel That Ended It* (University of Chicago). He is co-producer (with Judith Montell) of the documentary films *Professional Revolutionary: The Life of Saul Wellman* and *First Amendment on Trial: The Case of the Detroit Six*. His current book project is *Living Without God*.

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