
Introduction

For well over a century, those who have dreamed of a world in which inequalities of material well-being have been drastically reduced or even eliminated have looked to socialism as a way of accomplishing this goal. The basic idea is pretty simple: if inequalities of material well-being are generated to a significant extent by inequalities of wealth, then eliminating such wealth inequality would go a long way toward reducing inequalities of welfare. "Eliminating inequalities of wealth," of course, can mean a variety of things: state ownership with central planning; workers' and consumers' cooperatives; and even schemes for equalized individual ownership of shares in firms. But underlying all of these is the idea that a basic change in capitalist property relations is an essential part of a serious attack on the inequalities generated by capitalism.

In Marxism this idea has been embodied in the attempt to build a social scientific theory of the historical tendencies of capitalist development, or what has traditionally been called "historical materialism." Within historical materialism, socialism is seen not simply as a moral ideal for accomplishing certain emancipatory goals, but also as a real historical alternative actively posed within capitalism by the contradictions of its own development. Socialism, the argument goes, is the future of capitalism not just because it is desirable, but because capitalism creates the conditions for its realization.

The two chapters in this section explore a number of basic issues in the concept of socialism. (Other discussions of socialism and the emancipatory goals of radical egalitarianism can be found in chapters 10 and 11.) Chapter 6, "Capitalism's Futures," engages a specific aspect of the classical Marxist view of socialism. In classical Marxism, socialism (as the first stage toward communism) was viewed as the only real alternative to capitalism. Sometimes the expression "socialism or barbarism" was used to describe the alternatives facing capitalism, but this was largely a rhetorical device to increase support for socialism rather than a system-

atic part of the theory of historical trajectory. In the chapter we explore the idea that capitalism can have multiple futures and that the theory of history must therefore become a theory of possible historical trajectories. Once this way of thinking about alternatives is accepted, then we face the conceptual task of defining the inventory of these alternative possibilities. Working with the traditional Marxist concept of mode of production, chapter 6 explores one strategy for elaborating such a typology of possible futures by defining two post-capitalist modes of production and then examining the various ways in which these modes of production can be combined with capitalism and with each other to constitute different social formations.

Chapter 7 explores a striking challenge to traditional Marxist defenses of socialism. Marxists have always argued that some form of public ownership of the means of production is an essential condition for the transition to "communism," where communism is understood as a radically egalitarian, classless society governed by the distributive principle "to each according to need, from each according to ability." While "public ownership" might be subject to very different interpretations – from centralized state ownership and planning to decentralized forms of economic democracy – socialism was always seen as the necessary first step toward classlessness.

Philippe Van Parijs and Robert Van der Veen challenge this claim in their provocative essay.¹ They argue that we can move a long way toward communism *within* a capitalist society through a radical, if simple, reform of capitalism. The reform consists of granting every individual in the society an unconditional grant of income sufficient to live at a morally acceptable, if non-luxurious, standard of living. Such unconditional grants have the immediate consequence of breaking the link between "separation from the means of production" and "separation from the means of subsistence," that is the hallmark of the condition of the working class ("proletarianization") in capitalist society. In effect, paid work becomes voluntary since people can withdraw from the paid labor force and still live decently. Van Parijs and Van der Veen then argue that this kind of reformed capitalism would have the effect of moving the society significantly toward communism, at least in the sense that a sphere of communist distribution would be created inside of capitalism.

In chapter 7 I endorse the normative principles that lie behind basic income grants, but argue that such reforms cannot plausibly be instituted inside of an economy dominated by the private ownership of the means of production, since capital flight and disinvestment would undermine

1. Philippe Van Parijs and Robert Van der Veen, "A Capitalist Road to Communism," *Theory and Society*, vol. 15, 1987.

the sustainability of adequate levels of the grants. Socialism, at least in the minimal sense of public control over significant aspects of property rights, is thus a necessary condition for sustainable unconditional income grants.