

An Alternative Socialism

While the headline in a national news weekly recently started with an article entitled “We Are All Socialists Now,” the reality is obviously quite different. From all appearances capitalism has won the ideological war against socialism which began when socialism took the world stage during the first half of the 19th century. Capitalism of some sort seems to most people particularly within the United States to be the natural destiny of humanity. However while capitalism won the war against the brutal perversion of socialism called communism and while the great social democratic parties of Europe seem to have given up on any socialist vision greater than that of a mixed economy in which most economic decisions are made by a very strong capitalist sector, the instinct for social justice, human equality, community, and freedom which socialism has always struggled to support has not died. The sparks of socialism still survive within the hearts of individuals and in small groups in the United States and many other parts of the world. As the current world recession, energy, and ecological crises show; world capitalism’s future is not assured. Socialism could ultimately win the last war.

However a precondition for that victory must be a rethinking of the socialist vision. Most Americans and in fact most of the world’s people still imagine that socialism is primarily about the power of the state being utilized to dominate or control the economic direction of societies. This certainly has been the dominant conception of the Marxian and Fabian forms of socialism. Both European Social Democracy and Soviet Communism envisioned future socialist societies as being based on statist models of governmental ownership and control of the economic activities of society. Little if any role existed in either model for private enterprises or for companies which were directly owned and managed by workers themselves. The primary difference between these two was that communism supported the totalitarian communist state and social democracy supported the liberal democratic state. There is of course a world of difference between these two radically differing forms of the state.

In contrast to the statist forms of socialism however, powerful minority forms have existed which envisioned non statist models of a socialist future. The socialist movement of 19th century France was dominated by “mutualist” sometimes called “associational” forms of socialism which envisioned a socialist future in which workers themselves through their labor associations (unions) would democratically control the economic institutions of society. The economy of this future socialist society would be dominated by worker owned and managed cooperatives / companies. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries this associative or cooperative socialism transformed into revolutionary anarcho syndicalism. Anarcho Syndicalism while having some differences with socialist mutualism, still held the same basic vision of a free society directly controlled by workers themselves. The anarcho syndicalist and other anti statist forms of socialism spread from France to become the dominating form of socialism through out Spain and Italy.

In the United States the Socialist Party of America reached its high point of influence in the early decades of the 20th century. The SP USA seems to have had a conflicted view on the question of statist versus anti statist forms of socialism. The conflicts that took place in the party over the issue of the International Workers of the World, i.e. the IWW or “Wobblies” probably at least partially reflected that conflict. In the 19th century at least two organized movements not part of the socialist parties developed strong positions in support of worker and farmer owned cooperatives as economic alternatives to the system of corporate capitalism. These were the Knights of Labor which initially was the most successful American labor organizations to develop in 19th century America and the Peoples Party which represented the interests of the impoverished farmers of the South and West.

The Knights of Labor held a strong belief that one of the most important means by which workers could end the control of capital over their lives would be through the development of worker owned cooperatives. The People's Party like wise believed that the end of the oppression of farmers by the bankers of the Northeast would be through the development of farmers' cooperatives. With the collapse of both the Knights of Labor and the People's Party in the 1890s the movement for a strong cooperative alternative to the "wage slavery" of capitalism was greatly weakened as America entered the 20th Century.

In Europe things were not better. In France the anarcho syndicalist movement reached its height during the first decade of the 20th century and then disintegrated. In Italy the anarchists and all other socialists fell before Mussolini's fascists in the 1920s. The powerful anarcho syndicalist labor unions and anarchist dominated villages of Spain fell before General Franco's fascist troops during the Spanish Civil War. At that point in history it appeared that the alternative socialist tradition had been cast into the dust bin of history.

However the vision of a worker self managed society while it ceased to be embedded in powerful political movements continued in another form. In the 1800's large numbers of workers and reformers while avoiding politics and revolutionary rhetoric worked hard to develop various forms of worker owned and managed businesses and cooperatives. Many of the firms that have grown out of this movement have become economically successful. These businesses if they were small often were operated on principles of direct democracy by their worker owners. If large they were commonly governed by workers councils elected by worker owners. In general the worker councils of large cooperatives often having hundreds of workers will hire a team of professional managers which instead of being accountable to stockholders are ultimately responsible to the worker owners of the company.

Today thousands of worker owned cooperatives through out the world successfully compete for markets and customers. These agricultural, consumer, producer, and service cooperatives have not become the dominant economic sector in the modern world. However many have become very successful in competing in the hostile environment of capitalism, Some examples are the strong worker cooperative movement in the Emilia Romagna area of Northeast Italy. Of the 7500 cooperatives in this area over two thirds are worker owned. Over 10% of the work force in the region is employed by cooperatives. In Switzerland two of the largest supermarket chains Migros and Coop are in cooperative form. In Japan over 14 million citizens are members of the consumer cooperative movement.

However the most successful example of worker owned cooperative success is the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation head quartered in the town of Mondragon Spain. In 1956 five workers who had been trained at a technical school founded by the Roman Catholic priest Don Jose Maria Aristmendi developed the first worker owed cooperative ULGOR to produce kerosene stoves. The company initially employed 24 worker owners. Now the world wide Mondragon Cooperative Corporation employs over 85,000 workers in Spain itself and in nations such as Brazil and China forming a united system of self managing banks, insurance companies , a university and many other economic enterprises. Currently the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation is the seventh largest corporation in Spain. The example of the Mondragon and other successful examples of worker ownership and self management give the lie to the commonly held belief that workers simply do not have the ability to manage their own workplaces and companies. Mondragon gives evidence that a different form of civilization is possible.

As this brief historical summary shows the statist form of socialism which is what most Americans think of when they think of socialism has never been the only form of socialism. Alternative forms of socialism have always existed. It is with these alternative visions of socialism that the future lies. This is not to suggest that the anarchists, the syndicalists, An etc had all the right ideas. The political strategies developed by these movements were extremely flawed thus causing their ultimate demise. Social Democracy in the form of the SPD - the Social Democratic Party of Germany, the French Socialist Party and the British Labor party were strategically much wiser in their overall championship of immediate reforms designed to help workers. However I believe that the basic motivational vision of socialism lies in its vision of a free and just society in which workers themselves own the means of production.

Glenn King