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The Future of Socialism

by
James T. Burnett

Now that the Cold War has ended in a victory of Western democracies over the Communists of Europe, what might be in store for those people that call themselves "socialist"?

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by
James T. Burnett

What follows is a résumé of a talk I gave on March 13, 1993, about "the future of socialism" at a local meeting of Social Democrats. I posed a number of specific questions and provided answers.

1. Has the experience of Stalinism fatally discredited the ideas and names of socialism and social democracy?

No. The fact that not only Stalin, but Hitler, appropriated the name of "socialism" was certainly no help. However, every popular idea is fated to be perverted. Are the names of Christianity and Islam (although I am a believer in neither one) to be condemned because of the Spanish Inquisition and groups of screw-ball terrorists, thereby implying that hundreds of millions of people are effectively expelled from the human race? Let's also remember that the USSR called itself not only "socialist" but "democratic". Has "democracy" therefore become an obscenity?

And what has become discredited? While it existed, we never admitted that pseudo-socialist totalitarianism was socialism. There is no reason to lose our courage now.

2. Has the history of mass movements of the Left worldwide been one of steady accommodation to capitalism and abandonment of any idea of revolutionary social transformation, however defined?

Yes and no. We don't hear much about revolution from the parties of the Socialist International these days. However, and this applies to the previous question as well, what you do is

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much more important that what you say. If a basically kinder and fairer society is created, that is "revolutionary," even if you want to call it "reform". I have said in the past that I am not really a Bernstein-ian revisionist. In fact, I am a revolutionary Marxist. (How do you like them apples? I wouldn't say that before a mass audience, not because I don't believe it but because most people wouldn't understand what I meant.)

I mentioned the question of saying and doing. The point has been raised that political ideas must be judged by their consequences, not their words. If Stalinism was the practice of socialism, then that is how socialism must be judged. In the Bible (Matthew 7:20) it says, "By their fruits ye shall know them." Yes, movements are judged by their fruits (also by their nuts). But what was the Soviet Union the fruit of? Socialism? Social Democracy? (By the way, before World War I, "social democrat" was usually synonymous with "Marxist". Non-Marxist socialists preferred other words.) To return to the history of social democracy over the past several generations, I do not think that the basic ideas of socialism have been betrayed. There have been mistakes, setbacks, even catastrophes. However, I do not see any reason to think that radically different policies on the part of the mass socialist and labor movements of the world would automatically have been better in dealing with the challenges and dilemmas in trying to advance the interests of the working class and humanity in the context of democratic political systems.

3. Have the repeated failures of the democratic Left in America indicated an incurable incompetence in political strategy and tactics? Or is the U.S. just immune to the socialist idea?

There is absolutely no evidence that the leaders of the American Left have been intellectually inferior to their counterparts in other countries or that Americans are somehow "immune" to social democratic values and ideals. There are,

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however, certain special and "conjectural" elements that must be recognized. In the 1920's, American Communists debated the idea of "American exceptionalism". This was the notion that the U.S. was an "exception" to the laws of historical materialism formulated by Marx and Engels.

The United States is no exception to the general principles of history, but it does have some important exceptional features (which Marx would be the last to deny).

First, as former Communist Louis Hartz noted in the 1950's, (The Liberal Tradition in America) the U.S. is a truly "liberal" country. It was largely settled by people fleeing feudal oppression. It had virtually no feudal past of its own. We did not go through the equivalent of the French Revolution. (The American revolution was more like a war of national liberation.) Therefore, political divisions in America were not between liberals and conservatives, as in Europe, but between left-wing liberals and right-wing liberals.

Second, as Seymour Martin Lipset noted some years later, the U.S. is a country of broadly "left" values. The dignity of labor, the idea of equality, the ideal of a "classless" society are part of the American dream. It is true that these ideals were often honored in the breach. But it is good that they are here. American ideals are fundamentally socialist values. We are a proletarian nation. That is why I can say, with a straight face, that I am a patriot.

Third, there is the structure of the U.S. government. In Britain, France, Israel, or even Canada, you can win a few seats in the legislative branch and be taken seriously politically. Here you cannot. The American presidential system means that if you cannot, within a few elections, demonstrate that you can win the presidency or at least seriously influence the outcome of presidential elections you are not taken to be a political organization worthy of attention. This is, of course, just one aspect of the intentionally conservative slant of the U.S. Constitution (Read Federalist Paper #9).

All of this is not to deny the sectarian idiocy in which some of the best minds of the American Left indulged. In the 19th century Frederick Engels wrote to Karl Marx about the poor quality of the (mostly German) socialist movement in the United States. "The best ones stayed here," he said. In the 1930's, Norman Thomas (a man I greatly admire) refused to support Roosevelt and the New Deal and later took a pacifist position against directly opposing fascism in Europe. It must be admitted that FDR frequently wavered on domestic policy and never really "cured" the Depression until the coming of World War II. He was also less than decisive on foreign policy. His failure to aid the Spanish Republic played into the hands of both fascism and Stalinism. Nevertheless, Thomas's attitude had a great role in isolating the Socialist Party from the mainstream of the liberal community and the labor movement in the U.S. and allowing the Communist Party to gain influence. They, since the middle of the '30's, more or less supported Roosevelt and pointed to Hitler as the main threat to the world.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Max Schachtman, my mentor, started to develop a strategy to break American socialism out of its sectarian isolation. In the first place he urged giving up his existence as the leader of a semi-Trotskyite sect and entering the Socialist Party. In the second place he said that we should work within the Democratic Party (a point I at first violently opposed). Finally, he said that in the struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States, we should abandon the idea of their both being equally evil and admit that imperfect democracy was better than perfect totalitarianism — both from the viewpoint of humanity and from the viewpoint of the working class.

I believe that this strategy basically looked in the right direction. But it was less than a total success, to be euphemistic. Later on, my very good friend, the late Tom Kahn, told me: "We couldn't recruit anybody in the conservative '50s. We couldn't recruit anybody in the radical '60s. We can't recruit anybody in the Reagan years. We can't recruit anybody no

matter what we do. We're doomed to be an elite movement with a few people in influential positions." Tom rose to become Director of International Affairs for the AFL-CIO. I do not mean to disparage the memory of my dear friend, but I think he was far too pessimistic. Tom was well aware of the political disruption worked by the sectarian and Stalinoid "New Left" of the 1960s. Furthermore, all socialist/social democratic movements have faced formidable obstacles, but the obstacles have been overcome. One of the slogans of the Scottish Labor Party in the nineteenth century was: "No noble cause was ever easy."

4. Does the Socialist International have enough intellectual and organizational cohesion or morale to play a meaningful role in world politics?

Of course, it is impossible to tell with certainty. Worst case scenarios do happen from time to time. But I see no reason for despair, and some for hope.

Some parties in the International are better than others. But the same can be said of unions in the AFL-CIO, and of elements in Eugene V. Debs' Socialist Party. Leon Trotsky remarked, as mentioned in an earlier segment of this series, that a good worker does not throw away the tools that are available and demand perfect tools that do not exist.

The fact is that the International is a mass movement — the largest voluntary political organization in the world. Most people who more or less agree with us are in it or near it.

It is even possible that in a fragmenting and fratricidal world, institutions such as the Socialist International can play the role of a force for community and the continuation of "civilization" in a broad sense, much as the Church did for a millennium in Europe after the collapse of the Roman Empire.

And not to be forgotten is the fact that the International takes its American members seriously — astonishingly so in view of our size and history.

5. What are the immediate possibilities and problems of our political tendency in the next 4 to 8 years in the United States?

Of course I hope that the next 8 years will be the Clinton-Gore years. That is not the perfect scenario, but let us remember Trotsky's admonition about available tools alluded to above. In this context we should use our influence in the labor movement to move the Democratic Party to the left — in the sense of a more labor oriented perspective. We want the Democratic Party to be a party of "special interests" — the interests of the labor movement and the working class. We want to convert it into a social-democratic party.

In a more immediate framework, I see our tendency badly in need of two things.

A real youth movement is the first. By "real" I mean not just a letterhead. Our movement is aging. This is all to the good, considering the alternative as far as individuals are concerned. But we need replacements that will make up the leadership and activists of the future. I am all for recruiting labor functionaries — we could use more rank-and-file young workers, too. But, for better or worse, we need a solid base recruited from our traditional source of renewal — the college (and high school) campuses. It is extremely difficult to recruit and keep young people unless you already have some. But it is a challenge we must face.

Then, we need a press. We need a publication that is directed toward the public (at least our public). NOtes (the newsletter of the SD National Office) is good. I like it better and better. It should continue to serve the function of a kind of "internal bulletin". But we need more.

6. Is there anything in the tradition of Marxism that can be, or should be, saved?

The outstanding Marx scholar, George Lichtheim wrote: "Karl Marx (1818-1883) is the central figure in the history of socialism." That is almost undeniably true. Socialists (including social democrats) cannot disavow Marx — however much they might disagree with him. Not only would it be intellectually dishonest, our opponents on the Right wouldn't let us get away with it.

I do not want our political tendency to describe itself as Marxist — much less to insist that members must adhere to some philosophy called "Marxism". That would only be perversely confusing. The name of Marxism has been even more dirtied by the nightmare of Stalinism than has the name of socialism. I do feel, however, that any serious socialist or social democrat has to "come to terms" with Marx, and that any non-sectarian movement of the genuine Left must have a place for democratic Marxists.

What is valuable in the Marxist tradition? I can only list a few items without being able to discuss them here:

- A humanistic "materialism"
- A sociology of economics, including a class analysis of history and recognition of the centrality of material interests.
- The placing of the socialist ideal in an historic context.

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7. Are we experiencing the "end of ideology"?

Ideology is always dying and always being reborn. Human beings are always — whether they know it or not — reevaluating old ideas. Certain styles of thought go out of fashion for a while and then come back.

The social, economic, and political issues that have produced conflict and struggle at least since the time of the French revolution will not go away, because their roots in actual life have not gone away. Freedom from oppression, freedom from exploitation, true community and opportunity for self-actualization are far from dead issues in the world and in the United States. As long as they are alive, there will be people drawn to their cause. Furthermore, I think that in the last analysis, history is on the side of social democratic ideals. This is because of the basically social nature of humankind and the fact that, historically, the numbers and power of those who have a practical interest in freedom, justice, and community increases.

8. Why did the democratic Left fail so miserably to prevent the rise of Stalinism and fascism?

During the critical decades of the 1920s and '30s, there were elements of miscalculation, stupidity, and cowardice in the tactics and strategies of many social democratic parties. That cannot be denied. But it is easy to demand foresight and courage in retrospect. At least three things have to be considered. One is the disorienting role of Stalinism and fascism themselves. They appeared to many as truly revolutionary movements, and more dynamic than the traditional Left. (The role of the German Communist Party in actually helping Hitler to power deserves special emphasis as does the Communist splitting of the international labor movement.) Another point is that it is irresponsible to sit in one's armchair and urge the leaders of mass movements to pursue policies that would lead to civil war and probable

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defeat and mass murder. (We can speculate that the outcome could hardly have been worse than it was, but the politically responsible people at the time could hardly know that.) Finally, we must realize that the temporary victories of Stalinism and fascism were not the faults of social democrats alone. Liberals and conservatives did not stop these abominations either.

9. Aren't population and the environment the biggest problems today, not "class struggle"?

10. Aren't nationalist and religious problems becoming more important than economic ones?

These two questions can be handled together, at least in ultra-condensed format such as this.

Marx argued that economic interests, represented by classes of people, fundamentally determined the course of history and, in the long run, made socialism "probably inevitable". (The phrase is Hal Draper's.) Is this any longer true?

Marx was well aware that class struggle could be "hidden" and distorted. He could hardly have foreseen the difficulty class-based movements would have dealing with the secular (and sometimes not so secular) religion of nationalism — World War I, Stalin's "socialism in one country," and fascism.

And could Marx have envisioned the urgency that population growth and environmental protection have today? He called Malthus' theory of population a "libel on the human race." He was right. But the problem can hardly be dismissed. Again, I am not able to expand on my own ideas here. Suffice it to say that no movement that does not take these issues seriously will not be viable for long in the rest of this century, or in the next. We should certainly not fall into the philistine, "politically-correct-on-the-right" (not to say criminal and stupid) position that "green" issues do not matter.

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11. Is there any difference between "socialism" and "social democracy"?

There is as much difference as you want to make. We might say that "social democracy" means a capitalist welfare state, "socialism" means a society on the way to a radically more egalitarian and democratic social order, and even that "communism" (with a small "c") describes the society following the achievement of such a social revolution. Or we might say that "social democracy" and "socialism" mean exactly the same thing. In fact, parties of the Socialist International call themselves socialist (France), social democratic (Germany), labour (Britain), new democratic (Canada), etc. Words are not that important (not that they're unimportant either).

The dispute over the distinction between "social democracy" and "socialism" became a major issue in the tragic split between the SDUSA and Michael Harrington in the early 1970s. I say "tragic" not because the issues were unimportant or even that it could have been avoided. I say it precisely because the issues were important, but the result was the breaking of many close and valuable personal and political relationships and the loss of talent and perspective on both sides.

It is probably true that "social democratic" is the best term to use as the primary and most prominent description of our program in the United States today. Furthermore, I actually like the term. It is very descriptive of what I believe in. However, we should not be afraid of the word "socialism". That would be intellectually dishonest. It appears to write off a precious treasure of thought and history. We are members of the Socialist International. Anyway, we won't fool anybody, and we shouldn't try.

12. What is our image of a desirable, inspiring, but plausible future?

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The building of social democracy — or socialism — is the task of those who build it. It would be presumptuous, and futile, for some theoretician to provide a rigid set of directions. However, we obviously owe it to those we try to attract, and to ourselves, to give some general outlines.

For starters, the United States should be a country — given its tremendous resources — in which basic social services are at least on a level with those of the most advanced of other economically-developed countries.

- No significant number of people should be hungry or homeless.
- No one should be denied medical care.
- No one should be deprived of the education that he or she can use.
- All remnants of sexism and racism should be relentlessly attacked.
- The political system must be democratic, of course. It should be reformed to make it more functional and responsive to the needs of the people.
- The environment must be protected and such protection can be made consistent with the needs of employment and economic growth.
- The US must take a leading role in helping the less-developed countries of the world, not only for humanitarian reasons but for reasons of self-interest.
- An effective and attractive public transportation system should be devised to radically reduce the devastating effects of private automobiles on the environment and life-quality.
- Restrictive laws and policies that cripple labor unions must be repealed.
- Major economic decisions should be public first, private second. To the extent that a market mechanism gives people what they want most efficiently, it should be encouraged. When collective decision is better, it should be applied. There are many outlines for "market socialism," some very interesting.

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However, the market is not the last word. The public policy of a social democratic polity should be advancement with all deliberate speed toward the goal (to paraphrase Karl Marx) of: From all according to their abilities, to all according to their needs.

- Finally, but not least, a social-democratic society would consciously and ceaselessly promote the values of democracy, equality, justice and community.

13. Do we need a social democratic movement in the US?

Social democrats today make much of our respect for the individual — and rightly so, considering the unspeakable crimes of the 20th century. However, while we are individuals, we are also members of a social species. To enter into a murky subject, it seems that the word "socialism" was originally coined as a counterpart to (not as a contradiction of) "individualism". In any case, most of our important individual needs — virtually all of them — can only be fulfilled in cooperation with other people. In fact, without society we would lack civilization, speech and perhaps even thought.

The point is that people who have certain values and ideas are naturally drawn together to share them and try to give them effect. The role of a social-democratic organization in the United States is, broadly put:

1. Trying to disseminate and educate ourselves and others about our ideas.
2. Lending support to movements that are pushing the world in the direction we want it to go.
3. Trying to coordinate the activities of like-minded men and women and to contribute to their knowledge and morale through regular communication.

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An organized social-democratic movement, of course, enhances our influence in the Socialist International, the AFL-CIO, and the Democratic Party.

I have said before that among the most immediate tasks of American social democracy are:

1. The building of a genuine youth movement.
2. Increasing our general membership.
3. The creation of a public press.

There is nobody around just like us. So we — and they — need us.

Social Democrats: what we believe

Social Democrats are firmly committed to the principles on which the United States was founded: democracy, civil liberties, and social justice.

We Social Democrats believe in the extension of democracy to the economic and social spheres. Society must provide full employment, decent wages, and first-rate health care and education for all. Public as well as private institutions must be involved in achieving these goals.

We believe in democracy, justice, and prosperity not only for ourselves but for the world. We have worked tirelessly to oppose totalitarian movements everywhere.

We understand that democracy works through the interplay of groups with disparate interests. Progressive social change is achieved by working with those groups whose interests are most in consonance with those of society as a whole. Such groups include labor unions, neighborhood associations, consumer co-ops, and a wide variety of other political, civil rights, cultural, educational, and religious organizations.

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