

Socialism and Democracy

Socialism has been painted as the antithesis of democracy – and millions of people the world over believe this untruth. Right wing political propaganda states (among others) that

- A society based on socialism is “unnatural”. It goes against human nature which is individualistic. That’s why Socialist and Communist countries developed into totalitarian states. People had to be compelled to act against their normal human instincts.
- A socialist programme therefore will breed dictatorship and an authoritarian government with a repressive political police etc.
- Democracy and a system of checks and balances are only possible in the Free Market (capitalist) system. Socialism will lead to totalitarianism.

False beliefs such as these are among the main reasons why, despite the ongoing implosion of capitalism in Europe, the majority of the people are not yet decisively moving towards a Socialist economic model.

“Withering away of the State”?

From my (rather limited) understanding of Marx, socialism is the period of transition from a Bourgeois State which prioritizes the aims and requirements of capitalists to - Communism, which being a classless society, no longer needs the repressive organs of the State – the police, the military and the prisons – to enforce the will of the dominant class over the other classes.

Socialism is the transitional period in which the State, now under the control of the formerly oppressed classes¹, reorganizes the running of society based on the principle of solidarity – common ownership of productive assets², production for need and not for profit, worker management of production, etc. Socialism is about ending the exploitation of man by man, and for creating the social conditions – the “soft skills” and the culture (the superstructure) that will allow the state to “wither away”.

This brings up a crucial issue – if the State “withers away”, who collects the rubbish, or provides drinking water, or maintains the roads, and runs the hospitals. Marx clearly characterizes humankind as a social being – a species that has to live in a community to actualize the potential of each member. It is obvious that Marx expected that in Communism, ordinary people acting in solidarity would take up most of the functions of today’s State – worker run production units, community based local councils, needs such as health care and transport coordinated at regional level, etc – all coordinated and overseen by freely chosen representatives of the public.

In other words, the socialist era is one where the participation of people in their own governance is facilitated and expanded – so as to prepare society for the “withering away” of the State, when socialism reaches its “highest form” - communism! The socialist transition, as envisaged by Marx, is to be a profoundly democratizing process, going far beyond the limited forms of democracy allowed in Bourgeois states – we have just witnessed how in the USA, 2 very rich individuals both vetted and approved by the corporate class (who contributed a large portion of the more than USD 2 billion campaign process), were presented to the American public as the choices for President. (We are of course grateful that the more obnoxious one lost!)

We have to remove our blinkers!

We, the minority that still believes in the socialist alternative, have to think straight and strategize intelligently if we want to win over the majority to our course of action. And one of the crucial questions that we have to face with honesty is – why do so many people all over the world think socialism/communism is inherently anti-democratic.

Can that be entirely attributed to right wing propaganda? I think not! People are not so gullible! We have to admit that the “Gulag”³ existed in the USSR, and that reform movements such as that in the Hungary of 1956 were crushed by the USSR. We have to admit that Khmer Rouge caused the death of almost a quarter of their population in their efforts to “cleanse” their people of “bourgeois” traits and influences. Closer home we have to admit that Communist Parties in South East Asia embarked on a purge of “Deep Penetrating Agents”⁴ resulting in the execution of hundreds of party members in Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. Our side has provided a lot of ammunition to the right wing propagandists to spin and exaggerate!

However, to blame all of this on one man, and to demonize him obscures the truth. And the use of the term “Stalinist” as an epithet is not of any help! It gives the impression that the degeneration of the socialist experiment in the Soviet Union is due largely to the personality of Stalin – that the revolution there “fell” into the wrong hands! That distracts us from the very real problems that peripheral countries attempting to move towards socialism will face!⁵ Besides it polarizes what is a very crucial debate, and creates divisions in our ranks!

The mid 20th century was a time of intense class conflict – precisely the era when there was the need for a strong state to defeat the machinations of the class enemy. Could such a state have been under the democratic control of the oppressed classes? Chavez, in Venezuela, seems to be showing the world that that might be possible to pull off⁶. But for a number of reasons, as detailed by Trotsky in “*The Revolution Betrayed*”, the Socialist State in the USSR moved in an authoritarian direction and ended up as a “deformed workers’ state”. Among the reasons cited

by Trotsky is the decimation of the more inspired and revolutionary leaders in the bitter Civil War that took place after the 1917 revolution.

Many socialists caught in a Time-Warp!

Unfortunately, many socialists, especially those whose reading of Marxist-Leninist literature far outweighs their grass-root involvement, are caught in a time warp! Let me give you a test – answer yes or no to the following questions:

1. Do you use the term “the Dictatorship of the Proletariat”?
2. Would you say “we need to smash the bourgeois state apparatus”?
3. Would you say “the multi-party bourgeois political system is a sham”?

Would your answers to the above 3 questions reinforce or ameliorate the negative perception of the public regarding the totalitarian, anti-democratic nature of the socialist project? If it's the former, do you really expect them to come on board?

I believe that Socialists should temper the analysis contained in Lenin's *State and Revolution* regarding the class nature of the State with the following facts

- The majority of citizens in the world did not have the right to vote when Lenin wrote *State and Revolution* (1917). In the UK, women did not have the right to vote till 1918, and even then only women over 30 years who owned property could vote⁷. The vast majority of the population of Asia and Africa did not get the right to vote until the 1950s.
- Today, the right to vote for one's government is perceived as a very important political right by an overwhelming proportion of the peoples of the world. And the legitimacy of any government is now premised on winning the mandate from the people in free elections. Even when unpopular governments are toppled by street demonstrations as recently in the Middle East, the regime that takes over has had to call elections to gain legitimacy!
- There is currently widespread identification of socialism with authoritarianism and the curtailment of democracy. And this is a major factor holding people back from committing to a socialist program.
- There was a problem with the concentration of power in the Warsaw Pact States – the lack of checks and balances led to abuses of power, the creation of a privileged elite and institutional corruption. They do say don't they – absolute power corrupts absolutely?
- The Venezuelan example where the poor and the marginalized used the electoral process to capture state power and later defended that state from extra-parliamentary right wing attacks!

Marx's and Lenin's view of the State as an instrument of class rule remains true. But the way we choose to express this truth has to keep with the times! It is now 95 years since Lenin wrote *State and Revolution*. And a lot has happened in those 95 years – our side did make some mistakes, and we have to admit that we lost out in the propaganda war.

21st Century Socialism is the actualization of Democracy

Socialists should take higher ground! We should claim that socialism and democracy are indivisible. That we cannot have true socialism without democracy, nor true democracy without socialism. We must argue for worker representation in the management of factories, estates and other places of work; we want elected local government at all levels; we want worker and citizen participation (elected) in all nationalized monopolies such as Health Care, Power Supply, Public Transportation, etc; and we want participatory budgeting (where local communities are given the right to determine the allocation of the budget for their region). We stand for freedom of information, annual declaration of assets by all elected leaders, and provisions for the re-call of elected leaders midway through their term if they fail to meet certain basic criteria.

We should take the high ground in the debate on democracy, and argue for measures to diminish (if not eradicate) the influence of the corporate sector on elections. Shouldn't the State itself provide political parties funds for the election campaign? – perhaps based on the popular vote received by the various parties in the past 3 elections. Once the State provides the funds, funding from other sources should be disallowed. This will reduce the influence of the corporate sector over political process. We should argue also for balanced media coverage – that the TV channels should host more talk shows where politicians from both the government as well as the opposition appear to present their views on topics of national importance.

Socialists in Malaysia should push for

- Referendums to settle issues such as the re-nationalization of water in Selangor; the need for an FTA with the USA; and the need for nuclear reactors in Malaysia. We should argue that democracy is not confined to voting in the General Elections every 4 to 5 years. The people should be given a chance to participate in the making of key decisions regarding our country's future.
- A system of proportional representation at the Senate (Dewan Negara) which is currently by appointment by the Federal and State Governments. We could propose that 90% of Senate seats be distributed to the various parties depending on the proportion of the popular vote that they obtained at the General Elections. Of the remaining seats, a few should be reserved for the Orang Asli, the Penans and other Indigenous groups who should be allowed to elect their own Senators.

Finally, we should endeavor to improve the practice of democracy within our organisations – both parties and NGOs – such that ordinary members, new members, women and younger members are given the space to participate in the decision making processes. There is still an authoritarian tendency within many Left Parties – “I know better because of my experience or reading, or seniority – so you better listen to me”.

Building the new within the interstices of the old.

We will need people to run the institutions that will be set up in a socialist state for example worker management councils in factories, and the town/district councils. We need to have a layer of people who have the skills and attitudes to carry out their duties responsibly, and who can further the empowerment of the ordinary citizen – they need the soft skills to nurture the further democratization of society! We cannot wait for the formation of a socialist state before we start our program to build this new capacity in our people. This capacity, and its supporting culture, has to be nurtured within the interstices of the capitalist society that we are in. It should be our role to widen the spaces that do exist to expand the processes of consultation, collective decision making and the implementation of the decisions taken.

In short, we socialists have to present ourselves as the true democrats – the people who really believe and practice democracy – the main group genuinely interested in deepening the practice of democracy in our society.

Only then can we counter the negative perceptions that the public now has regarding the socialist project and gain the trust of the people. Only then will we be able to intervene effectively in the struggle of the masses to protect their interests and reclaim their humanity. And we need to get our act together fast – for the time we have to avert barbarism⁸ is fast running out!

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Notes

1. Using the term “oppressed classes” deliberately instead of the usual “proletariat” because I think we need to re-visit the issue of who exactly is the “revolutionary subject”. In this era of aging capitalism which is unable to generate enough jobs for everyone, those with regular jobs consider themselves fortunate and are hesitant to involve themselves in actions that might jeopardize their jobs. The unemployed, who represent the “proletarianized” in the sense that they have been stripped of the ownership of any means of production, but are unable to get a job are even in more dire straits. This strata of society is more inclined to join the protest movement.

2. I am not sure of the wisdom of State setting out to own all the burger stalls, the barber shops, market stalls etc and attempting to bring even these under central planning. Adam Smith’s market does a pretty good job of regulating production and prices and in allocating scarce resources in a situation when none of producers and distributors enjoy oligopolistic positions! Why can’t a socialist economy use the free market for the production and distribution of goods and services for consumers – with appropriate monitoring and regulation?

3. A system of prisons and detention centres used for political repression in the Soviet Union.

4. See Chin Peng’s *My Side of History*. Page 465 onwards.

5. We socialists need to understand and analyse the real obstacles that we will face in developing an alternative, non-capitalist economy in our countries. We need to brainstorm how we would deal with these.

6. Chavez has managed so far to avoid the Salvador Allende’s fate – the political mobilization and empowerment of the poorer strata of Venezuelan society has been able to counter the extra-parliamentary efforts of the capitalist class to conduct a counter-revolution.

7. The evolution of voting rights in the United Kingdom.

Year	Act	Men	Women
1832	Reform Act 1832	Adult males with land ownership. 1 in every 7 UK male could vote.	No vote.
1867	Reform Act 1867	All male houseowners	No vote
1918	Representation of People Act 1918	All men aged 21 years and above	All women aged 30 and above who owned property
1928	Representation of People Act 1928	All men aged 21 years and above	All women aged 21 years and above

Universal suffrage is a recent victory for the ordinary people.

8. Rosa Luxemburg is said to have said “*the choices facing humankind is either Socialism or Barbarism*”.