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A Cautious Case for Socialism

The discussion of any important social question must involve an inextricable mixture of fact and value. The fundamental impulse to change and especially to great change is a perception of present wrong and a vision of potential right. The initial impulse must still be checked for feasibility; we live in a world of limits, and what we desire may not be attainable or it may be attainable only at the expense of other high values. There is an ancient warning, “Be careful what you dream of when young; your dreams may come true!”

With the painter Braque, then, I can say, “I like the rule that corrects the emotion.” But that presupposes a strong emotion to begin with; and it is there I would like to begin.

Values and emotions are best apprehended personally, and I will speak of my own attitudes and their development. This does not mean that my values are all that matter, even to me. I hold that others are free and autonomous human beings, each capable of developing his or her own value system of equal worth and respect to my own. But by that very token, the values of others must always retain an element of mystery. The equal but different emotionally based axiological drives of others can never be fully communicated. This is not to say that they

cannot be partly understood; historical study, sociological inquiry, intellectual debate, and the many dimensions of the political process are all ways in which we do communicate values. But my own values are the starting point, though not the terminus. In the oft-quoted words of the sage Hillel, “If I am not for myself, then who is for me?” to which he immediately added, “and if I am not for others, then who am I?”

This methodological preface is by way of apology for the extent to which this paper is an intellectual autobiography. Notice the adjective, “intellectual.” Anyone who knows me will not be surprised; I have always preferred the contemplative to the active life. I prefer the freedom to see matters from several viewpoints, to appreciate ironies, and indeed to change my opinion as I learn something new. To be politically active means to surrender this freedom. I say nothing against activism—for others. It is only through the committed that necessary changes come. But each to his own path.

The great issues of socialism and capitalism became alive to me, as to so many others, in the Great Depression. My own family was severely affected. A precocious high-school boy, brought up with excellent newspapers and a family very interested in world events, could hardly help reflecting on the system and its failures. They seemed obvious enough. The long queues of unemployed at the soup kitchens shown in the newspapers and the newsreels, the waves of bank failures and the personal tragedies of the depositors, the

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gasping struggles of relatives who tried to run small businesses, and the ominous connection between unemployment and the rise of Nazism were convincing evidence that the current economic system was a disaster. The idea, sometimes bruited about then, that unemployment was the fault of the unemployed—that they were lazy or incompetent or whatnot—struck me as laughable. I regret to say that this concept has been revived by some of my fellow economists.

I was impressed not only by the personal tragedies of unemployment but also the clearly anomalous coexistence of desperate needs with keeping idle the resources, men, and machines, which could meet those needs. I was of course economically illiterate, though considering the standard pre-Keynesian textbook economics this may have been an advantage. One day I remember working out to my temporary satisfaction an explanation why the capitalist system could not achieve full employment; it was in effect a Keynesian explanation except that there was no investment at all. I realized, however, that it was a little too powerful, since there could never have been any prosperity.

What gave bite and impetus to these reflections on the rottenness of the times was the presence of an alternative possibility. It has become a truism that a scientific theory, however incapable of explaining the facts, will never be displaced except by another theory. It is even more true that a social system, political or economic, however bad its consequences, will be replaced only if there is a vision of a better system. The idea of socialism was easily available. One read about it even in textbooks and newspapers, as well as in the that major source of education, the public library. Here we did seem to have a resolution of our difficulties. Surely, a rationally organized, centrally coordinated economic system could avoid the instability of the capitalist economy and the terrible human and material costs of unemployment.

Further, there was such an economy. The Soviet Union was building and expanding,

there was no unemployment, at a time when the advanced capitalist economies were spiraling downward or at best stagnating. The *New York Times* was the source of this favorable information, much more to be believed than the Communist party pamphlets passed out on the streets. To be sure, the Hearst newspapers were telling us about famine and repression in the Ukraine; but who would believe them? My family was hardly radical; indeed, they changed from Republicans to New Deal Democrats only under the influence of poverty. But the Hearst newspapers were not respectable; my unwillingness to trust them as against the *Times* had perfectly respectable middle-class justification.

I have spoken so far as if efficiency were the main value. Indeed, it was true that the apparent sheer irrationality of the workings of capitalism was a basic condemnation. But as I observed, read, and reflected, the capitalist drive for profits seemed to become a major source of evil. Clearly, the individualistic profit drive had something to do with the uncoordinated inefficiency of capitalism. But, more, the drive for profits had other manifestations. The Nye committee, a congressional investigating committee, was engaged in a major investigation of the munitions industry; its influence over governments in creating the fears that improved its sales seemed to be well documented. The economic explanations of imperialism were virtually standard. Charles Beard and other historians had accustomed us all through their books to seeking an economic explanation of all political actions. The Constitution represented a certain set of economic interests, the Civil War a conflict, sometimes called “irrepressible,” of different profit-seeking groups. Most serious of all, World War I, a tragic living memory, was clearly caused, at least in great measure, by competition among the capitalist interests of the different powers.

It was in this area of political-economic interactions that Marxist doctrine was most appealing. I was never a Marxist in any literal sense, unlike a great many of my fellow

students at the City College, in New York. Irving Kristol has written an evocative article on the intensity of intellectual life among the anti-Stalinist Marxists who foregathered in Alcove One and listed the many eminent social scientists and literary critics who emerged from this training. It would appear a Marxist background is an essential prerequisite for the development of a neoconservative thinker.

I could not follow Marxist doctrine very literally for a number of reasons. The labor theory of value was a stumbling block even before I studied economics with any seriousness; there were too many obvious phenomena that it ignored. Nevertheless, the insight Marxist theory gave into history and particularly as to political events was striking: the state as the executive committee of the bourgeoisie, the class interpretation of political and social conflicts, and the interpretation of war and imperialism as the conflict of competing national capitalist interests were illuminating and powerful. It appeared more profound than the alternative versions of the economic interpretation of history; they seemed to be mere muckraking, the behavior of venal individuals. Marxism put the system rather than the individual into the foreground.

What I drew from this thinking was an argument for system change. The basic criterion for change was moral and ethical. I did not accept ideas of historical inevitability. What the Marxist analysis did say to me, at least then, was that the system of production according to profit established vested interests in destructive activity, most especially war and imperialism, but also oppression of workers and destruction of freedom. I do not believe I ever accepted the theory that racial discrimination was the result of capitalist endeavors to divide the working class, but I certainly accepted the general belief that the capitalist class would overthrow democracy rather than lose its power, as it had done in Italy and Germany and was then striving to do in Spain.

Thus, beside the efficiency value, the values of freedom and the avoidance of war were

vital in my attitude toward socialism. The two were and are intimately linked in my mind. Being killed is, after all, a rather extreme form of deprivation of freedom, and in a typical modern war, the killer is subject to as much compulsion as the killed. I tended therefore to a rather pacifist position. This position, to be sure, began increasingly to separate me from a revolutionary socialist position.

On the value of freedom, I don't think I ever thought it through; it was just a value that was taken for granted. Obviously, an American education inculcates such a value strongly. However, I was naive or conscientious enough to take it very seriously and to be shocked at examples of its denial. Discrimination against blacks—denial of their political rights, segregation in housing and employment—was the most blatant case domestically; remember that lynching still existed. Imperial control of the United States, as in the Philippines, and, much more extensively, by Great Britain in India and Africa, served to demonstrate that political freedom had narrow limits under capitalism.

The freedom of workers seemed to me much restricted. Strike-breaking by fairly direct and brutal methods, as well as more subtle forms of economic pressure, was a common event. Even apart from overt conflict, the regular operation of the factory appeared as a form of regimentation and a denial of individual freedom—an implication then widely accepted, expressed in such movies as Chaplin's *Modern Times* and Rene Clair's *A Nous La Liberie* and, more subtly and profoundly, in Lewis Mumford's *Technics and Civilisation*, then very famous and still worthy of rereading.

A broader and less direct form of control flowed from the concentration of control in American industry, indeed capitalist industry everywhere. The importance of relatively few large industrial and financial corporations did not need much documentation, and numerous investigations documented their scandals. But massive support for the more scholarly minded came from Berle and

Means's *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, which established not merely the concentration of the productive sector into large firms but also the concentration of control within those firms. Even the capitalist stockholders were deprived of power, if not wealth.

The absorption of the economy by a small elite implied that the formal democracy and freedom was increasingly a sham; the major decisions on which human welfare depended were being made by a few, in their own interests. The same process had another implication, as Marx had argued long before; production was in effect already being carried on in socialized enterprises, so that the shift to a completely socialist economy would be that much easier.

As some of my examples indicate, I did not find any sharp line to draw between the values of freedom and of equality. The typical example of lack of freedom was a great inequality of power. Much is made these days of the alleged opposition of freedom and equality; but I would have regarded the two as close to identical in many contexts. As for inequality of income, I took it for granted that it would be reduced under socialism by the abolition of the income category of profits.

Finally, there was a strong antipathy to an economic and social system based on selfish and competing motivations. I eagerly sought confirmation in the works of contemporary anthropology, such as Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, for the proposition that cooperation was at least as natural as competition.

My pacifist views coincided in a natural way with these broader motivational assumptions. Like many others of the time, I was strongly attracted by Gandhi's nonviolent campaigns against British rule. The underlying assumption was the common humanity of ruler and ruled; the appeals to cooperative and altruistic motives seemed to have at least some success as against the simple selfish exercise of power.

To sum up, the basic values that motivated my preference for socialism over capitalism were (1) efficiency in making sure that all

resources were used, (2) the avoidance of war and other political corruptions of the pursuit of profits, (3) the achievement of freedom from control by a small elite, (4) equality of income and power, and (5) encouragement of cooperative as opposed to competitive motives in the operation of society.

From the perspective of greater education and experience and with 40 years of history, my understanding of the relation between these values and the desirability of socialism has altered. Many countervailing considerations have been raised by further analysis and knowledge of the facts.

One problem that I did not face was highlighted by history almost immediately. If capitalism was to be rephended for its concentration of control and consequent inequality of power and lack of freedom for the average man, what would happen under socialism? Did not state ownership imply or at least permit overwhelming concentration of power in the hands of a political elite? Soviet Communism pushed these questions into our consciousness. For me, the Moscow trials of 1935-36 were a dramatic, even traumatic turning point. It was clear that the old Bolsheviks were unjustly convicted, and their confessions only increased the horror, since it spoke of barbaric pressures. I reflected, too, that in the improbable event that the charges of treason were true, the Stalin regime was equally condemned; for what could induce those who had risked all under the Czars to create this new world to turn against it save a deep sense of its evil? However the facts were interpreted, they were not compatible with the idea that the Soviet Union was a democracy or was even moving in that direction. Differences of opinion, even among socialists, were not being tolerated. I had not believed that the Soviet Union was a genuine democracy at any time, but its political backwardness could easily be explained by history and the ring of quite genuine enemies it had. But now it appeared that as the generation raised under socialism came to adulthood and as the Soviet Union grew stronger vis-a-vis its enemies, the repression grew greater, not less.

The true enormity of the Soviet tyranny

was revealed only in time. But from my point of view, the challenge to socialism was already reasonably clear. At a minimum, the socialist economy did not guarantee democracy and individual freedom. I had the naive idea that in the absence of a profit-making class, there would be no class interested in achieving power over others. It became clear that this view was hardly adequate. The worse problem was the possibility that socialism, by concentrating control of the economy in the state apparatus, facilitated authoritarianism or even made it inevitable. I return to this vital challenge below.

I became seriously interested in the study of economics only after beginning graduate study around 1940. Needless to say, learning something of the workings of the economic system and of the logic of neoclassical economics had a considerable effect on my attitude toward socialism. George Stigler remarked once that the study of economics is a highly conservatizing force. To some extent this is true, but only to the extent that any increase in knowledge may lead to greater realization of limitations. The inner coherence of the economy, the way markets and the pursuit of self-interest could in principle achieve a major degree of coordination without any explicit exchange of information—in short, the valid elements in Adam Smith's doctrine of the invisible hand—became important possibilities that qualified a simple view of the inefficiency of markets. Similarly, the facts of long-term economic growth in spite of the contemporary economic debacles had to register—though, to be sure, one could scarcely ask for a greater testimonial to the creative power of capitalism than was already contained in the *Communist Manifesto*.

My immediate reaction was to interpret neoclassical economic theory and particularly the then new and rapidly developing discipline of welfare economics as pointing to an ideal efficient economy rather than the actual one, marked both by massive unemployment and by monopolistic distortion. Socialism

was the way in which the ideal market was to be achieved. This doctrine was held by many, including especially the professor here at Columbia to whom I owe so much, both intellectually and personally, Harold Hotelling. Graduate education in economics at Columbia at that time, just before our entrance into World War II, seemed curiously designed to emphasize the ideal nature of neoclassical theory. The dominating voices, Wesley Mitchell, J. M. Clark, and Arthur F. Burns, held that neoclassical theory had little descriptive value. Though Clark and Burns, at least, certainly had no support for socialism, their views, when taken into conjunction with the theorems of welfare economics, resonated with my convictions that socialism could yield a more efficient economy.

Finally, the development of Keynesian economics and, after the war, its gradually increasing application changed the nature of the efficiency discussion. In true Hegelian fashion, capitalist instability and the socialist counterattack seemed to be synthesized: it seemed possible to have an economy that retained much of capitalist drive and initiative and yet gave room for the government to intervene to avoid at least the worst inefficiencies of unemployment and the idling of other resources. I accepted provisionally what seemed to be a widespread consensus in the euphoria of postwar economic growth. The state had an active role to play in maintaining effective demand and in dealing with the many imperfections of the market system revealed by theoretical welfare economics—the overcoming of market failures and monopoly and the realization of economies of scale. These interventions should take the form of relatively impersonal measures, taxes and expenditures, rather than detailed controls and direct regulation. The higher taxes meant that the government was automatically engaged in redistributing, and some of us felt that it should go much further.

I have spoken of a provisional acceptance. I still felt it important to explore more deeply the possibility that socialism was a superior possibility. I was more aware of the complexities of operation of a socialist system and

sought to develop more deeply the theory of such a system. I also sought to explore more fully the criteria for a democratic social organization. These matters could be thought of as matters for slow reflection and long-term analysis, so long as the economy seemed to be performing so well and the political process seemed to be responding, however slowly, to demands for improvements in efficiency, redistribution, and the overcoming of market defects. The apparent pause in economic growth, the crisis in stabilization policy occasioned by the current inflationary threats and realities, and the loss of purpose in redistributive measures all combine to raise anew the question of alternatives to capitalism. In many of our sister democracies, the issue is much more closely on the agenda than it is here. Beyond that there is the large fraction of the world where socialism and authoritarianism coexist in varying degrees of comfort. And then, since, to twist a phrase of Marx's, every historical phenomenon appears as both tragedy and farce, we have the widespread solemn use of the word "socialism" to cover some of the most absurd travesties of that term.

Let me spend the remaining time in reexamining briefly the case for socialism from the viewpoint of the five values mentioned earlier: efficiency, separating political decisions from selfish economic interests, freedom, equality of income and power, and the stress on cooperative as against individualistic motives. These are not balanced remarks; only the favorable side will be presented. Perhaps on another occasion I will present the contrary case. The case for socialism from each value viewpoint is much more refined and complex than I originally thought, and there are many qualifications that must be made. But I still consider that the argument can be made.

For reasons of time, I will deal only briefly with the last two points. With regard to equality of income, let me first remark that I am taking it to be a good, other things being

equal. It can be objected that the drive for equality may dull incentives, and the net result will be a reduction in everyone's real income. This is a legitimate instrumental objection but not an objection to the value presumption in favor of equality as such. Many current thinkers object to distributive equality on principle, on the grounds that it contradicts freedom of property. This is a large subject; I simply state my conviction that property is itself a social contrivance and cannot be taken as an ultimate value, indeed, that institutions that lead to gross inequalities are affronts to the equal dignity of humans and can only be accepted as necessary evils.

It certainly seems as obvious as can be that a socialist economy can achieve much closer income equality than a capitalist economy. The category of profits is absent. While we now understand that most inequality in income is due to inequality of so-called labor incomes, it is certainly true that the ability to acquire profits increases inequality. Further, the higher end of the income of professionals and executives is largely a rent in the economic sense and would be unnecessary in a socialist society. One needn't ask for utopian dreams of virtually complete equality of income.

In a world of any complexity, there must necessarily be both antagonistic and cooperative elements. The model *laissez-faire* world of total self-interest would not survive for ten minutes; its actual working depends upon an intricate network of reciprocal obligations, even among competing firms and individuals. But the capitalist system is structured so as to minimize cooperative endeavor. The worker is a factor of production, a purchased item, not a part of a team. The attempts to handle externalities in recent years have led to interesting resistances; antipollution regulations are perceived as a threat to profits, not a social gain. Again, socialism is far from a magic cure. Each suborganization, for example industrial plants, will have its own proximate goals, which will not mesh completely with those of others. But the system should permit a greater internalization of broader goals. It should be

easier for a plant to regard product safety as one of its socially valued outputs.

The comparative economic efficiency of capitalism and socialism remains one of the most controversial areas. The classical socialist argument is that the anarchy of production under capitalism leads to great wastage. An appeal to the virtues of the price system is, in fact, only a partial answer to this critique. The central argument, which implies the efficiency of a competitive economic system, presupposes that all relevant goods are available at prices that are the same for all participants and that supplies and demands of all goods balance. Now virtually all economic decisions have implications for supplies and demands on future markets. The concept of capital, the very root of the term "capitalism," refers to the setting-aside of resources for use in future production and sale. Hence, goods to be produced in the future are effectively economic commodities today. For efficient resource allocation, the prices of future goods should be known today. But they are not. Markets for current goods exist and enable a certain coherence between supply and demand there. But very few such markets exist for delivery of goods in the future. Hence, plans made by different agents may be based on inconsistent assumptions about the future. Investment plans may be excessive or inadequate to meet future demands or to employ the future labor force.

The nonexistence of future markets is no doubt linked to uncertainty about the future. But this points to an even more severe shortcoming of the actual capitalist system compared with an ideally efficient economic system. The uncertainties themselves are relevant commodities and should be priced in such an economy. Only a handful of insurance policies and, to a limited extent, the stock market serve to meet the need for an efficient allocation of risk-bearing.

In the ideal theory of the competitive economy, market-clearing prices serve as the communication links that bring into coherence the widely dispersed knowledge

about the needs and production possibilities of the members of the economy. In the absence of suitable markets, other coordinating and communicating mechanisms are needed for efficiency. These come close to defining the socialist economy, although admittedly wide variations in the meaning of that expression are possible.

As I have already suggested, the existence of idle resources is a prime example of coordination failure. The experience of the Communist countries bears on this point. With all their difficulties and inefficiencies, and they are not few, recurrent or prolonged unemployment is not one. A graph of economic activity in the United States is, under the best of circumstances, jagged and spasmodic, that of the Soviet Union much smoother. Fluctuations there are, as there must be in any complex dynamic system. But the planning, however inept, serves to keep the basic resources and their uses in line.

The sophisticated antisocialist reply to this argument is not to deny it but to emphasize that a socialist system is not an ideal resource-allocating mechanism either. Much is made of the obvious inefficiencies of the Communist countries, though the Soviet growth rate and technical development has on occasion caused fear and trembling and overall still averages above the United States rate. As all too frequently happens in the social sciences, no clear-cut dominance pattern of efficiency can be found either way. All that can be said is that socialism is clearly a viable economic system, contrary to what many would have asserted in the not-too-distant past, and it does not release energies and productivity far beyond the capitalist norm.

I have referred rather vaguely to the corruption of the political system by narrow economic interests as one of the evils of capitalism that might be avoided under socialism. More explicitly, a democratic polity is supposed to be based on egalitarian distribution of political power. In a system where virtually all resources are available for a price, economic power can be translated into political power by channels too obvious for mention. In a capitalist society, economic

power is very unequally distributed, and hence democratic government is inevitably something of a sham. In a sense, the maintained ideal of democracy makes matters worse, for it adds the tensions of hypocrisy to the inequality of power.

My early assumption that only capitalists would have an incentive to influence democratic decisions was too simple. Everyone in an economy has an economic interest. It is also true that individuals have interests and attitudes that do not derive from their economic improvement and may even oppose it. But it is today a widespread doctrine, held by conservatives as well as socialists, that concentrated economic interests are more than proportionally powerful in the political process. George Stigler and his colleagues have maintained with great vigor that regulation of industries is usually carried out in the interests of the regulated and is not infrequently originated by them. The reasons offered are perfectly in accordance with ordinary economic principles; there are economies of scale in the political process, so that a small economic interest for each of a large number of individuals is less likely to get represented than a large interest by a small number.

So long as the state power can be democratically run, much of this distortion of the democratic process should be minimized under socialism. Income inequalities should be greatly reduced. Economic power deriving from managerial control rather than income should be less easily translatable into political power than under a regime of legally and practically autonomous corporations.

We come then, finally, to what is probably the most serious of all the concerns about socialism. Is it in fact compatible with freedom and democracy? It is the fear that socialism may bring tyranny that has inhibited so many of us from being more active advocates.

It is noteworthy that when Joseph Schumpeter wrote on *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, he affirmed that socialism,

which he thoroughly disliked, was fully compatible with political democracy. It is only perhaps with Friedrich von Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* that the association of capitalism and democracy became a staple of the procapitalist argument. The association itself, however, was not new; it was one of the standard Marxist views, though not held by all. The hypothesis was that the resistance of capitalists to the coming of socialism will lead to the subversion of democracy by them. At least the transition will require the "dictatorship of the proletariat," a phrase whose ambiguities have been only too well clarified by history. This Marxist view indeed gives credit to capitalism for the origins of democracy; it is an appropriate political form, a parallel to the ideas of free contract. So long as the "contradictions" of the system are not too sharp, the nominal equalization of political power offers no threat because economic power is so preponderant. But democracy will decline with the failure of capitalism. The experience of Chile, to cite only a recent example, certainly gives some credence to this theory.

Ironically, the current conservative model explaining the supposed association of capitalism and democracy relates to the Marxist as a photographic negative to a positive. It too suggests that the political "superstructure" is determined by the "relations of production." The conservative model contrasts the dispersion of power under capitalist democracy with its concentration under socialism. Political opposition requires resources. The multiplicity of capitalists implies that any dissenting voice can find some support. Under socialism, the argument goes, the controlling political faction can deny its opponents all resources and dismiss them from their employment.

This theoretical argument presupposes a monolithic state. It is something of a chicken-and-egg proposition. If the democratic legal tradition is strong, there are many sources of power in a modern state. Adding economic control functions may only increase the diversity of interests within the state and therefore alternative sources of power. It is

notoriously harder for the government to regulate its own agencies than private firms. Socialism may easily offer as much pluralism as capitalism.

The overpowering force in all these arguments is the empirical evidence of the Soviet Union and the other Communist countries, and it is strong. But the contrary proposition, that capitalism is a positive safeguard for democracy, is hardly a reasonable inference from experience. The example of Nazi Germany shows that no amount of private enterprise prevents the rise of totalitarianism. Indeed, it is hard to see that capitalism formed a significant impediment. Nor is Nazi Germany unique; Fascist Italy, Franco's Spain, and the recurrent Latin-American dictatorships are illustrative counterexamples to the proposition that capitalism implies democracy.

Further evidence can be drawn from the increasing role of the state in guiding economic activity. The United States, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, though not

socialist as that term is properly used, have certainly greatly increased their intervention in the economy. Yet democracy and political and personal freedom have never been stronger in these countries. Indeed, Samuel Huntington has argued that an *excess* of democracy makes it difficult to meet the current problems of the United States.

The evidence, it seems to me, points to the view that the viability of freedom and democracy may be quite independent of the economic system. There can be no complete conviction on this score until we can observe a viable democratic socialist society. But we certainly need not fear that gradual moves toward increasing government intervention or other forms of social experimentation will lead to an irreversible slide to "serfdom."

It would be a pleasure to end this lecture with a rousing affirmation one way or the other. But as T. S. Eliot told us, that is not "how the world will end." Experiment *is* perilous, but it is not given to us to refrain from the attempt. □

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