

On the Moral Basis of Socialism

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In a luminous sketch the Italian writer Ignazio Silone recalls an incident from his childhood. He once saw “a small, barefoot, ragged little man” being dragged down the streets of his village. “Look how funny he is,” the boy said to his father.

My father looked severely at me, dragging me to my feet and led me to his room. I had never seen him so angry. . . .

“What have I done wrong?” I asked him. . . .

“Never make fun of a man who’s been arrested. Never!”

“Why not?”

“Because he can’t defend himself. And because he may be innocent. In any case, because he’s unhappy.”

This anecdote yields a moral perspective that sustains a politics of socialism. We are asked to concern ourselves with the victim through an act of imaginative relation. We are instructed tacitly in the oppressive weight of power. We are incited to the values of skepticism and sympathy, the two responses that, together, form the basis for whatever remains of civilization in the 20th century.

Without invoking God or religion, though these may nevertheless lie behind it, Silone’s story affirms the essence of moral response: a lively awareness of what the other needs and how the other feels. Silone’s anecdote thus has its evident ties with the Kantian view that each man, as a rational moral agent, is owed respect simply as a man—and, adds Bernard Williams, “since men are equally such agents, [this respect] is owed equally to all, unlike admiration and similar attitudes, which are commanded unequally by men in proportion to their unequal possession of different kinds of natural excellence.” The respect put forward in Kantian theory is a kind of secular analogue to the Christian conception of what is owed equally to all men as children of God.

This view of man lies somewhere at the basis of our desire for a socialist society, though of course it is by no means confined to socialists nor does it constitute, by itself, a sufficient argument for such a society. Turn to the work of Adam Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and you will find there an empirical equivalent to the view that something is owed all men because they are children of God:

Though our brother is on the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. . . . It is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. . . . By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body. . . .

Smith was hardly so naive as to suppose the workings of imagination that lead to active sympathy must always result in the removal or amelioration of suffering. But insofar as suffering *is* eased, it is in part through “entering as it were” into the body of the sufferer. Smith is trying to answer a question far more difficult than: why do we claim moral value for one or another political idea? He is trying to answer the question: why should we care or exert ourselves for the good in human affairs? Why respond to anything but self-interest narrowly perceived as greed or privilege?

Few systems of moral or political belief—finally, perhaps none at all—have simply asserted that power is its own justification for being. The need for claiming that our interests or schemes have some objective value seems all but universal. And that need for self-justification produces, of course, a large appetite for self-delusion. Still, there are traditional modes of argument in behalf of caring and exerting oneself for the public good. We speak of imaginative sympathy as a ground of moral life. We speak of enlightened self-interest: since man has no choice but to live as a social animal, he can make his existence tolerable only through some codes of community and order. Or we say that the good comes to us as a mandate

from God—though this hardly relieves us of the irksome need to interpret His commandments, which means to take responsibility for our own moral life.

TOWARD THE WHOLE complex tradition of moral speculation, Marxists have tended to be ambivalent, reductive, and dismissive. They have often denied or minimized the moral argument for socialism, disparaging it as sentimental or ahistorical; they have stressed the claim that in the age of developed capitalism, as it makes possible a life of plenty, the movement toward socialism arises from an inner dynamic of history, with the working class assigned the historical mission of abolishing both class exploitation and itself. But is not the idea of a “mission” perhaps a way of smuggling in the very moral imperative that the history-obsessed Marxists have tried to banish?

To see the movement toward socialism as inherent in the historical process was an attempt to escape the utopian fantasies of the past and to grasp the hard instruments of power. But in truth Marxists have never been quite able to abide by this submission to the impersonal workings of the historical process. Somewhere in Marxism there is buried an infatuation with Justice. There is intense moral indignation in Marx's *Capital* that cannot quite be reconciled with his claim to be a mere scientist charting the course of capitalist economy. It is, oddly enough, in Lenin that one can see most sharply the contradiction between the claim to historical objectivity and the energies of moral passion. He writes that “Marxism contains no shred of ethics from beginning to end”; but he also invokes “the revolutionary consciousness of Justice,” which, capitalized or not, surely must contain at least a shred of ethics; and he tells us also that “Men liberated from capitalist exploitation will gradually become accustomed to abide by the elementary rules of social life known from time immemorial”—which sounds suspiciously like a relativist casting a warm eye at rudimentary absolutes.

Even when it was possible to believe—it is hard today—that the impersonal processes of history lead to socialism, the socialist leaders still had to account for their own behavior. Few were of proletarian origin, few acted out of direct class needs, and most were inspired by moral visions their ideology sometimes inhibited them from expressing. It was Adam Smith's “sympathy” and “imagination” that stirred them—it was the poetry of socialism, by now a little worn, and not the

economics, by now a little worn out. Indeed, the very conception of a “vanguard party” advanced by Lenin—few ideas have done more damage to the cause of socialism—can also be seen as a smuggling into politics of a moral intent, the conscious activity of a selfless elite, though without the scrupulous self-criticism that should always accompany claims for a moral ideal.

Today we are likely to suppose that the case for socialism, no longer planted very firmly in the “dialectic of history,” must be made increasingly on moral grounds: — that the extension of democracy to the workplace is a desirable fulfillment of the claim for political freedom, that extreme inequality in socioeconomic status thwarts genuine liberty, that the fulfillment of the human personality requires a setting of cooperativeness and fraternity. Is this argument, however, distinctive to socialists? May not liberals also claim that they want to realize the moral goals socialists invoke?

If there is one point of crucial difference, it has to do not with political freedoms and personal fulfillments but with equality. The egalitarian bias is stronger among us than among our liberal friends, though I cannot here go into the reasons for this bias. Yet one can sympathize with the view of Jean Jaurès, the French socialist leader of 75 years ago, that democratic socialism should be seen as, finally, the fulfillment of the ideals of the French Revolution:

Only socialism will give the Declaration of the Rights of Man its entire meaning. Revolutionary bourgeois law has freed the human personality from many shackles. But it forces new generations to pay a duty on the capital accumulated by their predecessors. . . . We, on the contrary, claim that all the means of production . . . must be put at the disposal of all human activities and help to make them free.

WE ARE APPROACHING dangerous reefs: the reefs of righteousness and moralism, the supposition that merely being a socialist somehow betokens moral virtue. I think here of a comic version, the once-famous remark of James P. Cannon, leader of the American Trotskyists, that they were “the only moral people.” Since they numbered some 1200, that put the moral condition of the U.S. in even greater jeopardy than some of us had already supposed.

To assert that a commitment to socialism somehow entails moral virtue is to risk collective arrogance, which, in breeding fanaticism, is far

more dangerous than individual arrogance. And when socialist groups are small, there is a special temptation to fall back upon moral posture: we are powerless, ergo, we must be good. It might, after all, mean we are wrong.

The moral value of a political position must always be tested anew. It rests much more with immediate, particular consequences than with cloudy, ultimate ends. Socialism must always in some sense be a Utopia, that is, an envisioned good society enabling and guiding our conduct of the moment; but it withers into lifelessness, and can even be a menace to freedom, if allowed to become an absolute in the name of which anything may be justified or nothing done. The vision of the good society enlarges moral life insofar as, through the very grandeur of its claims, it reinforces small actions.

Some of the points I am struggling with were brilliantly illuminated 40 years ago in a debate between Leon Trotsky and John Dewey. Trotsky had invoked as the basis for judging actions of revolutionists the furthering of the cause of socialism, while Dewey argued that the Bolsheviks, in invoking the “ultimate end” of socialism, allowed themselves too readily to use means for which there was neither immediate need nor probable justification. What matters in the choice of means is not just the large proclaimed end, almost always some attractive idea like socialism or democracy, but the probable consequence, the *next* likely end in the chain of means and ends. Dewey distinguished between two common uses of the term “end” in the endless discussions about “means and ends”—“the final justifying end and ends that are themselves means to this final end.” What has given a bad name to the maxim that “the end justifies the means,” wrote Dewey, is that “the [‘final justifying end’ or as we would say, socialism] is commonly employed so that it is not necessary to examine what the actual consequences of the use of chosen means will be.” The point is decisive.

THERE ARE other difficulties. A major one is that no portraiture of the good society can be of much consequence unless it is interwoven with and enables a politics that has at least *some* possibility of realization. Otherwise we can only say—and this must be a haunting specter for American socialists—that we share certain moral sentiments displayed in our vision of the good society but that we do not have any likely avenues of historical fulfillment. A moral sentiment may be admirable but it does not, by itself, constitute a sufficient politics.

When in fact we examine the record of socialism, we find that it is precisely in the realm of proposals for its enactment that it has suffered from terrible vagueness and been forced to make major retreats. An intellectual scandal has been its paucity of thought regarding the structural workings of socialist society: most Marxists, in fact, have not thought it worth the trouble. And meanwhile socialists are no longer nearly so confident as once we were about the value of nationalization of industries; we become increasingly doubtful about the efficacy of centralized planning; we begin to speak about “market socialism” as if to verge on the heresy of a mixed economy; we question whether the dialectic of history will, on its own, deposit us in the sunshine of socialism.

As a result, the socialist movement has lived in recent years with a schizoid division between a posture of moral rectitude, usually indulged when things were going badly or the troops had to be rallied or practical proposals seemed scarce, and an immediacy of pragmatism, usually indulged when there was a small chance for little changes.

Still more, we must confront the possibility urged by critics that between our animating moral sentiments, lovely as these may be, and our political-social proposals there are deep conflicts. It would be foolish to deny that the events of this century, especially in the lands of Communist totalitarianism, force us to take seriously at least two arguments of our opponents:

1. *That the effort to construct a socialist society must necessarily entail a large amount of bureaucratic centralization, which, in turn, means the danger of authoritarianism.* Have we not, explicitly or tacitly, granted at least some force to this argument? Do we not recognize that a completely nationalized economy, insofar as it places a fearful power in the hands of the state, contains a probable thrust toward authoritarianism? That is why we have moved away from statist visions of socialism to stress decentralization, political freedom, workers’ control of production—the last would become especially important if we could ever determine what we mean by it.
2. *That there is an inescapable conflict between liberty and equality, which the effort to build socialism would excite in deplorable ways.* Allow sufficient liberty and society must turn increasingly inegalitarian; try to enforce equality in stringent ways and you do so at the cost of liberty. There is,

we now recognize, "something" to this, and thereby our vision of socialism becomes "less perfect" but perhaps better.

Surely if we *had* to choose between liberty and equality, we socialists would choose liberty; first because we regard it as the very medium of civilized life, and second, because we know that with liberty it is possible to struggle for greater equality, while in the absence of liberty, as we see in Russia, China, and Cuba, the only kind of egalitarianism is one imposed by an authoritarian elite, which is to say, no egalitarianism at all.

Socialists have some strong counterarguments. Michael Walzer has nicely remarked that

What is necessary is that everyone . . . be able to say yes or no. Without liberty, there could be no rightful distribution [of goods] at all. On the other hand, men are not free, not politically free at least, if *his* yes,

because of his birth or place or fortune, counts seventeen times more heavily than *my* no. Here the case is exactly as socialists have always claimed. . . : liberty and equality are the two chief virtues of social institutions and they stand best when they stand together.

The transformations of modern society prompt us to ground the case for socialism more strongly than ever in moral claims. Precisely our strong reasons for doing this may constitute—at least if one has some skepticism about the human enterprise—strong reasons for being cautious, modest, self-critical in our moral assertions. We want to link the guiding ideal with the immediate purpose, but to invoke the need for doing so is not the same as doing it. Perhaps there is only one way of minimizing our mistakes, and that is to see democracy, the freedom embodying our moral values, as the foundation of all we do, all we want, all we are. □

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haps he will in the future for others. The love Marion and Bernard knew, however, belongs for both to an inadmissible past. Between Marion and Steiner, their bond of endurance has become so fast that even Bernard, were he given the chance, would prefer not to break it, and rather say that his love never existed. What does remain ambiguous is the sensation we feel in recognizing all this. For each character has renounced something: Bernard, a woman he loved; Marion, the belief that she was loved; nor is Steiner exempted, having heard the rehearsals from his little room and spoken his question to Bernard. A very temperate and unenchanted realism pervades these final moments, for all their theatrical magic. And the same is true of our final view of Daxiat, the right-wing journalistic hack, coarse, bullying, and pathetic, whom a new system raised for a while to

the power of cultural arbiter. He has been the most memorable of all the minor characters, and Truffaut's documentary summary contains a glimpse of him in flight from the guns of the resistance. How will he end? The straight melodramatic convention dictates that he be tried as a collaborator and found guilty. A more cynical modern ending would leave him a millionaire after the war. But these are the cheap rewards of a genre in its pure state, and again Truffaut's polite refusal is characteristic. His narrator tells us that Daxiat went on to an ordinary life and died of cancer. That small surprise of the genuine was available to *The Last Metro* because from the first it was no less conscious of history than it was of the history of an art. Truffaut looks on both only as irrefutable premises, and his love of chance proclaims his love of truth. □