

TOWARD A LIBERAL SOCIALISM?

Can the ideals of socialism survive the collapse of “actually existing socialism” and the current discrediting of the historic struggles against inequality? The very idea of social justice is threatened by the new anticollectivism, and the project of economic democracy increasingly appears as the relic of a bygone age, dominated by the rhetoric of class struggle.

The recognition of the virtues of pluralism is indeed an important achievement, but it would be a serious setback in the fight for democracy if we were to accept “actually existing (capitalist, liberal) democracies” as the “end of history.” There are still numerous social arenas and relationships where democratization is critically needed. The task for the left today is to describe how this can be achieved in a way that is compatible with the existence of a liberal democratic regime.

In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*¹ we attempted to redefine the socialist project in terms of “radical and plural democracy” and to picture it as the extension of democracy to a wide range of social relationships. Our intention was to insist on the necessity of articulating socialist goals with the institutions of political liberalism. I am convinced that the only socialism with a future is a liberal socialism, and I want to examine in this article the work of a few thinkers who provide us with ideas useful for the elaboration of such a perspective.

Norberto Bobbio and Italian Liberal Socialism

Norberto Bobbio has been for a long time one of the most eloquent advocates of the need to recognize the value of liberal institutions and to

defend them against the defenders of “true democracy.” He has consistently put forward the thesis that socialist goals could be realized within the framework of liberal democracy and that they could only be realized acceptably within such a framework. For him, liberalism and democracy necessarily go together: a democratic socialism is bound to be a liberal one. He writes that “the liberal state is not only the historical but the legal premise of the democratic state. The [two] are doubly interdependent: if liberalism provides those liberties necessary to the proper exercise of democratic power, democracy guarantees the existence and persistence of fundamental liberties.”²

Bobbio belongs to an important tradition of Italian liberal thought that since the nineteenth century, under the influence of John Stuart Mill, has been receptive to socialist ideas. In the twentieth century it was crystalized around the journal *La Rivoluzione Liberale* created by Piero Gobetti and the movement *Giustizia e Libertà* founded by Carlo Rosselli, who wrote a book called *Socialismo Liberale*. The aim of this movement for liberal socialism was to combine socialist objectives with the principles of liberal democracy: constitutionalism, parliamentarism, and a competitive multiparty system. In recent years, this movement has gained a new relevance due to the profound ideological transformation of the Italian Communist party (PCI). Its majority decided to renounce communism and to change its name to *Partito Democratia della Sinistra* (PDS).

Bobbio, whose influence in that debate should not be overlooked, remains faithful to this Italian tradition when he argues that today the project of liberal socialism requires a new social contract that articulates justice with civil rights. According to him, the current debate

around contractarianism should provide the terrain for the democratic left to make an important intervention:

The crux of this debate is to see whether, starting with the same incontestable individualistic conception of society and using the same institutional structures, we are able to make a counter-proposal to the theory of social contract that neo-liberals want to put into operation, one which would include in its conditions a principle of distributive justice and which would hence be compatible with the theoretical and practical tradition of socialism (p. 117).

It is no wonder then that Bobbio expresses sympathy for the proposals made by John Rawls in his celebrated book *A Theory of Justice*, and that he takes Rawls's side against Robert Nozick's defense of the minimal state in *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. He considers that, as long as democracy is alive and individuals retain a right to determine the terms of a new social contract, they are going to ask not only for the protection of their fundamental rights and of their property; they will also want to ensure distributive justice.

But will such a new social contract provide the solution, as Bobbio believes, to the growing ungovernability of modern industrial societies? Can a social contract that articulates the demands of justice with individual rights solve the problems facing complex societies today? Is that the way to get out of what he presents as the "paradoxes of democracy"? This is not the view of contemporary communitarian critics of liberalism who affirm that, because liberal individualism is the cause of the problems, it cannot be the path to their resolution. In order to evaluate the adequacy of Bobbio's proposals, we need to examine his diagnosis of the difficulties that confront democracy in complex societies.

Bobbio's Conception of Democracy

Bobbio insists, again and again, that we should adopt what he calls a "minimal definition of democracy" as a form of government "characterized by a set of rules (primary or basic) that establish who is authorized to make collective decisions and which procedures are to be

applied." These "rules of the game" are designed to facilitate and guarantee the widest participation of the majority of citizens in the decisions that affect the whole of society. The function of some of these rules is to establish what is meant by the general will. They determine who has the right to vote, guarantee that the votes of all the citizens have an equal weight, and specify which type of collective decisions are going to be put into effect. But in addition to these three rules, there are others that refer to the conditions that need to be fulfilled if the exercise of the freedom to choose is to be effective. There is first the principle of pluralism, according to which a democratic system must guarantee the existence of a plurality of organized political groupings that compete with one another. Second, voters must be able to choose between different alternatives; and, finally, the minority must be guaranteed the right to become a majority in its turn.

Bobbio argues that only a liberal state can guarantee these arrangements and the basic rights they entail: freedom of opinion, speech, assembly, the press, political association, and so on.

These are the rights on which the liberal state has been founded since its inception, giving rise to the doctrine of the *Rechtsstaat*, or juridical state, in the full sense of the term, i.e., the state which not only exercises power *sub lege*, but exercises it within the limits derived from the constitutional recognition of the so-called "inviolable" rights of the individual. Whatever may be the philosophical basis of these rights, they are the necessary precondition for the mainly procedural mechanisms, which characterize a democratic system, to work properly. The constitutional norms which confer these rights are not rules of the game as such: they are preliminary rules which allow the game to take place (p. 25).

But will the game continue—and attract new players? Bobbio's "paradox" is the fact that we want more and more democracy in conditions that are increasingly unpropitious, given the growth of large state organizations, the development of technocracy and bureaucracy, and the rise of cultural conformism. He writes:

In a nut-shell, these four enemies of democracy—

where I am taking democracy to mean the optimum method for making collective decisions—are the large scale of modern life; the increasing bureaucratization of the state apparatus; the growing technicality of the decisions it is necessary to make; and the trend of civil society towards becoming a mass society.³

What then is the remedy proposed by Bobbio? Can something be done to further the process of democratization in modern advanced societies? Bobbio insists that we should abandon all hopes of a “true democracy,” a perfectly reconciled society, a radical consensus. Modern democracy, he insists, must come to terms with pluralism, and this implies that dissent is permanent and inevitable. Consensus is necessary only as far as the rules of the game are concerned. Those rules, when implemented, are the best guarantees against autocracy and heteronomy, the best framework for the struggle for individuality, which he sees as the driving force of democratic politics.

Once the illusion of direct rule has been discarded, says Bobbio, we can begin to envisage how democracy can be strengthened and expanded. This can only mean the extension of representative government to more and more areas of social life; the central question is not to look for the emergence of a new type of democracy but for a process “in which quite traditional forms of democracy, such as representative democracy, are infiltrating new spaces, spaces occupied until now by hierarchic or bureaucratic organizations.” In a word, we should proceed from the democratization of the state to the democratization of society, struggling against autocratic power in all its forms in order to take over the various spaces still occupied by nondemocratic centers of power. To democratize society requires, for Bobbio, tackling all the institutions—from family to school, from big business to public administration—that are not run democratically. He declares,

Nowadays, if an indicator of democratic progress is needed it cannot be provided by the number of people who have the right to vote, but the number of contexts outside politics where the right to vote is exercised. A laconic but effective way of putting it is to say that the criterion for judging the state of democratization achieved in a given

country should no longer be to establish “who” votes, but “where” they can vote.

Pluralism and Individualism

As we have seen, according to Bobbio, liberal socialism can offer a solution to the present shortcomings of democracy by providing a new social contract having at its center a principle of social justice. The aim is to combine social, political, and civil rights, putting them on a strong individualistic foundation by appealing to the principle of the individual as the ultimate source of power. The issue of individualism is crucial for Bobbio: “Without individualism, there can be no liberalism.”⁴ The compatibility of liberalism and democracy lies for him in the fact that both share a common starting point: an individualistic conception of society. The modern idea of the social contract represents, in his view, a Copernican revolution in the relationship between individual and society because it marks the end of all organicistic and holistic notions. By putting the particular individual with her interests, needs, and rights at the origin of society, the individualistic conception made possible not only the liberal state but also the modern idea of democracy, whose fundamental principle is that the source of power is each individual taken independently and counted equally. Liberal ideas and democratic procedures could therefore be interwoven, and their combination leads to a situation where “Liberalism defends and proclaims individual liberty as against the state, in both the economic and the political sphere; democracy reconciles individual and society by making society the product of a common agreement among individuals.”⁵

I agree with Bobbio about the importance of individualism in the birth of the modern conception of society, but it seems to me that the real question today is whether a certain kind of individualism has not become an obstacle to the extension of democratic ideals. Many of the problems that Bobbio finds in modern democracies could be attributed to the effects of individualism. For instance, in their critique of the work of John Rawls, contemporary com-

munitarians have argued that it is precisely the individualistic conception of the subject existing with his rights, independently of his place in society, that is at the origin of our problems. Far from seeing the solution in a new social contract, they consider that it is the very idea of a contract, with its atomistic implications, that needs to be abandoned. This is why they argue for a revival of the civic republican tradition with its richer conception of citizenship and its view of politics as a realm where we can recognize ourselves as participants in a political community organized around the idea of a shared common good.

It is not my intention to enter into that debate here,⁶ but I would like to present some reflections on the specific problems faced by the extension of democracy today and the way in which an individualistic framework cannot deal with them. Let me start by indicating points of convergence with Bobbio. He is certainly right to stress the importance of representative democracy and the need to abandon the illusion of perfect consensus in a completely transparent society. Modern democracy has indeed to come to terms with pluralism. But it is precisely on that point that individualism is an obstacle because it does not allow us to “theorize” pluralism in an adequate way. If representative democracy needs to be defended, we must also acknowledge that its theory is really deficient and that we have to formulate new arguments in its favor. As Carl Schmitt (an unlikely ally) has shown convincingly in his critique of parliamentary democracy,⁷ the classical theory of representation has been rendered obsolete by the development of modern mass democracy. As a consequence, not only did parliament lose much of its influence, it also became the arena where antagonistic interests came into conflict. Bobbio seems to agree with such a critique of the classical view of representative democracy, with its conception of political representation that stipulates that the representative who is called on to pursue the interests of the nation cannot represent particular interests and be subject to a binding mandate. Indeed, he declares that no constitutional norm has ever been more violated than the veto on binding

mandates. He even goes so far as to admit that it could not have been otherwise and declares:

Confirmation of the victory—I would dare to say a definitive one—of the representation of interests over impartial political representation is provided by the type of relationship, which is coming to be the norm in most democratic states in Europe, between opposed interest groups (representatives of industrialists and workers respectively) and parliament. This relationship has brought about a new type of social system which is called, rightly or wrongly, “neo-corporatism.”

Bobbio leaves the question at that point and does not provide us with a new rationale for representative democracy, one that would take account of the role played by interest groups. To be sure, Bobbio refers to certain developments in democratic theory that have shifted the emphasis of the classical theorists on the ideas of “participation” and “sovereignty” in order to put the idea of accountability at the center of the theory. It could indeed be argued that his insistence on a procedural conception of democracy is proof that he situates himself in the camp of the realists rather than the classicists. The problem is that he often combines elements from the two traditions without realizing that they can be in conflict. Can one put together Schumpeter and Mill in such an unproblematic way as Bobbio seems to believe? And things get even more complicated when it comes to the point of articulating socialism with that peculiar mixture. Besides insisting on the necessity of a principle of distributive justice and the need to recognize social rights, Bobbio does not really have much to say on that topic.

If we want to find solutions to the problems facing liberal democracies today and provide an effective articulation between socialist goals and liberal principles, we have to escape the framework of individualism. I am not arguing for a return to an organicist and holistic conception of society, which is clearly inadequate for modern democracy.

The best alternative to such a view is not the individualistic conception predominant in liberal theory. The problem is to understand the individual, not as a monad, an “unencumbered” self existing previous to and indepen-

dently of society, but as constituted by an ensemble of "subject positions," participating in a multiplicity of social relationships, member of many communities and participant in a plurality of collective identifications.

Hence the representation of "interests" and the recognition of "rights" have to be posed in a new way. The idea of social rights, for instance, is best envisaged in terms of specific communities. It is through her participation in specific relationships that a social agent is granted rights, not as an individual outside society. Some of these rights will of course have a universal character and belong to all members of the political community, but others will be related to specific social situations.

What is at stake here is not a rejection of universalism in favor of particularism but the need for a new relation of the two. There is a way in which the abstract universalism of human rights can be used to negate specific identities and repress specific communities. Without coming back to a view that denies the universal human dimension of the individual and makes room only for pure particularism, it should be possible to conceive of individuality as constituted by the intersection of a multiplicity of personal and collective identities that constantly subvert each other. But what does this mean in political terms?

Associational Socialism and Liberal Socialism

Once we have broken with the straitjacket of individualism, we can imagine the articulation between liberalism and socialism in a much more promising way. In such an endeavor we can find an important source of inspiration in the current of associational socialism, a third tradition in the history of socialism, which flourished during the nineteenth century and until the early 1920s both in France and Britain. Paul Hirst, a leading British social theorist, who for several years has been working towards the elaboration of a credible Labour response to the neoliberal policies of the Tories, has recently argued that the end of the cold war as well as some recent economic changes in the West have created conditions in which those ideas could become interesting again.⁸ Using the work of Michael Piore and Charles Sabel,

he claims that the current move toward flexible specialization in manufacturing has increased the importance of regional economic regulation and small-to-medium-scale firms.

Decentralization and the promotion of economic self-government offer the best prospect of a form of industrial organization in which the major contributing interests—the providers of capital, management expertise and labor—have an active interest in the continued manufacturing success of the firm (p. 21).

It is because of the need for democratization and decentralization that, according to him, associational socialism becomes relevant. For its central idea is that economic units should be cooperatively owned, self-governing associations.

Like Bobbio, Hirst considers that socialism must formulate its objective as the deepening of liberal democratic values and that the realization of its goals should not be seen as requiring a break with constitutional government and the rule of law. He also understands democracy as a struggle against all forms of autocratic power and socialism as a specific dimension of that struggle. "If socialism has any relevance today, it is in raising the two linked questions of the democratic governance of private corporations and the democratization of state administration."⁹ But, unlike Bobbio, he tries to put forward specific proposals to help us visualize what form such a democratization could take.

Hirst sees associational socialism as representing the only challenge to corporate capitalism that respects the principles of liberal democracy. His ideas are very useful, even if—as he himself recognizes—the appropriation of such a tradition must be selective, since some of its ideas have clearly become obsolete. What is particularly convincing is the argument that associational socialism, because of its emphasis on the plurality and autonomy of enterprises, can enhance the politics of Western pluralism and liberalism. Clearly, if we want a more democratic society, we need to make room for a multiplicity of democratically managed associations and communities. Because associational socialism encourages the organization of social life in small units and challenges the forms of hierarchy and administrative centralization, Hirst argues that it can

give us important models for the democratization of corporations and public bodies.

Education, health, welfare, and community services can be provided by co-operatively or socially owned and democratically managed bodies. Associational socialism permits such bodies to set their own objectives. It is thus compatible with a pluralistic society in which there are distinct sorts of values or organized interests. It can tolerate and, indeed, should welcome, for example, the Catholic Church and the gay community, which provide health and welfare services for their members.¹⁰

Obviously, pluralism can never be total, since it requires a legal order and a public power; contrary to the views of pluralists like G.D.H. Cole and the early Harold Laski, the state can never become merely one association among others; it must have some primacy. An associational society needs a state, and one important question still to be tackled concerns the form that such a pluralist state should take. In Hirst's view,


A pluralist state defines its *raison d'être* as the assistance and supervision of associations. Its legal task is to ensure equity between associations and to police the conduct of associations. It treats

both individuals and associations as real persons, recognizes that individuals can only seek individuality and fulfill themselves through association with others, and accepts that it must protect the rights of both individuals and associations.¹¹

This last point is particularly important because it indicates a crucial area for democratic theory. Associational socialism can show us the way to overcome the obstacles to democracy constituted by the two main forms of autocratic power—large corporations and centralized big governments. But this requires a break with individualist modes of thought long dominant in the liberal tradition. Today, to think of democracy exclusively in terms of the control of power by individuals *uti singuli* is completely unrealistic. If, as Hirst points out, "democracy's future at the national level rests less on the choices of individual voters than on the effective representation of organizations representing major social interests,"¹² the central issue of democratization becomes: how can antagonistic interests be controlled so that no concentration of interests exercises a monopoly on economic or political power and dominates the process of decision making?

Western societies are democratic because of the pluralism of interests that they have been able to secure and the competition that exists among them. Elections in and of themselves do not guarantee democracy if they are only mechanisms for legitimating governments that, once elected, are unresponsive to the needs of the citizens. A multiplicity of associations with real capacity for decision and a plurality of centers of power are needed to resist the growth of technocracy and bureaucracy. Pluralism can only be defended and deepened by relinquishing the atomistic liberal vision of the individual and by recognizing that it is only through participation in a set of social relationships that the individual is constituted.

It is in this area, in the formulation of a new approach to individuality that restores its social nature without reducing it to a simple component of an organic whole, that the socialist tradition of thought can enrich and deepen liberal democracy. We are witnessing today the return of many premodern forms of community with the increasing appeal of fundamentalist and populist movements. In many cases they are a reaction against



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the social disintegration caused by liberal individualism. When this is not the case, as in the former communist world, it is a dangerous illusion to see the remedy in the development of the very individualism that is at the origin of the problems faced by advanced liberal democracies. Hence the urgency of taking seriously the

socialist critique, because it is only through the articulation between political liberalism and socialism that we will be able to create a framework in which the demands for a modern and pluralistic form of community can be met. Indeed, this is the task that the project of radical and plural democracy has set itself. □

Notes

¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).

² Norberto Bobbio, *The Future of Democracy* (London: Polity Press, 1987), p. 25. All subsequent references are from the same work unless otherwise noted.

³ Norberto Bobbio, *Which Socialism?* (Polity Press, 1987), p. 99.

⁴ Bobbio, *Liberalism & Democracy* (Verso, 1990), p. 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶ I have discussed this issue in several articles: "American Liberalism and Its Critics: Rawls, Taylor, Sandel and Walzer," *Praxis International* 8, 2 (July 1988); "Rawls; Political Philosophy Without Politics," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1987; "Democratic Citizenship and the Po-

litical Community," in *Community at Loose Ends*, ed., James Creech, University of Minnesota Press (forthcoming).

⁷ Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (MIT Press, 1985).

⁸ Paul Hirst, "From Statism to Pluralism," in *The Alternative: Politics for a Change*, eds., B. Pimlott, A. Wright, T. Flower (London: W.H. Allen, 1990).

⁹ Paul Hirst, "Associational Socialism in a Pluralist State," in *Journal of Law and Society*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 1988, p. 141.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

¹² Paul Hirst, "Representative Democracy and its Limits," in the *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 2, April-June 1988, p. 202.

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