

“God,” we quoted Tolstoy, “is the name of my desire,” I see no reason why we should surrender this pregnant hope to all the current Eastern and Western enemies of social promise. Socialism is a guiding and regulative idea. It cannot as such ever be realized fully, but it can serve as a measuring rod for comparing the present with what can be attained through a politics of democratic participation in a fraternal self-governing society. The image of socialism is a yardstick

that keeps us honest when we attempt to assess the ailments and tragic consequences of the here and now. The Utopian image of the “good society” can serve as a stimulant for constructive moral change, even though it cannot be fully implemented. At every step on the road we will discover new tasks, which come into view when some of the old goals have been attained. The utopian socialist vision can spur us on even as it leads us to discover new challenges along the way.

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### Bogdan Denitch

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**W**ithout an imaginative utopian dimension, socialist thought remains excessively rooted in the present. It ends up as something very worthwhile, that is, the reform of the existing system; but it remains restricted to what is “realistic” within the existing order. The borders of the possible are not even tested. That kind of “realism” has almost destroyed West European socialism, leaving behind reasonable but dull administrators of a more humane capitalism within welfare states.

The problem in thinking about a socialist society or program is how to make such a society seem possible and desirable to human beings who have been shaped by the present culture and social order. This is a major problem, because the cultural hegemony of the capitalist order is now probably stronger than it has been at any point since the industrial revolution. To be sure, the Social Democratic parties increasingly solve that problem by not worrying much about any kind of socialist future and meanwhile doing what they do rather well, that is, defend the welfare state.

Mass literacy and state-controlled education, combined with a commercialized mass culture, successfully hasten the retreat of the autonomous cultures that had been built up by the industrial working class. The autonomy provided by homogeneous working-class neighborhoods, with their pubs, clubs, political organizations, and associations linked to left parties and unions, is for the most part, throughout Western Europe and North America, either vanishing or disintegrating. The

majority of even left voters in advanced industrial societies today have been socialized to accept a whole range of assumptions of a capitalist civilization about what is possible and desirable, how one should live one’s life, and what is the necessary minimum of material goods. Traditional solidarities of class, occupation, and workplace are replaced by possessive individualism. Left politics increasingly resorts to talking about resentments of segments of the population and the unfairness in the distribution of the benefits of increased productivity rather than raising universalist egalitarian demands and a vision of a radically different organization of production and leisure. To raise such demands is considered unrealistic, but failing to do so destroys the moral and emotional basis of the movement.

Mass socialist politics in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries had been rooted in an autonomous working-class subculture, which, whatever its inadequacies, provided an alternate political socialization for generations of socialist, trade unionist, and broadly radical democratic activists. The present urban community, by contrast, is atomized, collective goals are mobilized in the service of the existing order, and the idea that the common good may require sacrifice and effort is replaced by notions of self-fulfillment, often through individual advancement and accumulation of possessions. This process extends to all organizations of citizens in the modern capitalist democracies, so that parties, voluntary associations, and unions become goods to be

passively consumed and democracy an exercise in consumer choice rather than a process requiring active participation by an informed citizenry.

Although a high degree of organization is not required to disrupt and even topple an existing political order, it is required for constructing an alternate order. That is one of the recent lessons from Eastern Europe and even the Soviet Union. I believe that only in societies with a high degree of autonomous self-organization and a thick set of overlapping movements and institutions, does it become possible to think of moving beyond the limits that capitalist civilization sets. These limits are “set” mostly in the minds of the public. To be sure, they are limits considerably more flexible than the traditional left used to believe. When faced with dangerous alternatives, advanced egalitarian and welfare-state measures may well be accepted. However, the intellectual hegemony of the capitalist system signifies an ability to define what is “objectively” possible to do in society.

**T**his is why Robert Heilbroner has done something useful by asking us to imagine what could, or rather should, lie beyond the present reformist valhalla, the Swedish welfare state. We are asked to think about a real place, or an almost real place, a more advanced Sweden, and that gives us an implicit time frame, presumably a few decades. What can be counterposed to the hegemony of the capitalist culture are the independent organizations and social movements that accept at least partially different values. The most massive example of such an organization that has, even if to a limited extent, alternative values is the Swedish labor movement. It is *that* which makes Sweden different and “special” for me, not the welfare state per se. After all, advanced welfare states exist in other Scandinavian countries and Holland. Germany, France, Belgium, and Italy also have relatively advanced welfare states with a fair degree of control over capital as a minimal norm of civilized behavior.

What is unique about Sweden and makes it *possible* to think of it as a site for a project

beyond the welfare state are not just its generous social provisions or high living standards but rather the massiveness of its labor movement. It organizes so high a percentage of the working population as to be qualitatively different from all other social democracies and welfare states. The figure for the trade unions is 85 percent of all employed! That is, 90 percent of all production workers. No other country begins to approach these figures. Such figures affect other political statistics, including the proportion of social democratic voters who are members of the party, the cooperative movement, the women’s organizations, and so on. This degree of organization makes it possible to answer other questions about what might be done in a near-Sweden.

Such mass organization determines what popularly supported measures can be undertaken without being brought down by the invisible but very real power of capital even in an advanced welfare state. It is the very real threat of a “strike of capital” backed up by the world capitalist order that acts as the real limit on how far one can move beyond the welfare state.

The only way to counter the potential veto by capital of any major move on the part of a left government is massive popular organizations of the type that the Swedish labor movement possesses. In Sweden labor can block attacks on the welfare state, and it can block attempts by capital to sabotage legislation. Imagine a political strike in a country where 85 percent of the work force is organized! Its numbers give it strength, and its solidaristic wage policies, which have reshaped the Swedish income distribution toward greater equality, give it moral weight. Unlike, for example, the Anglo-Saxon unions, Swedish labor did not favor the better-placed and more powerful unions; instead, it pushed for increases across the board as a conscious decision to reduce wage differentials between skilled and unskilled, between women and men. That is, it rejected the capitalist competitive norms when determining its strategy.

What a labor movement can do in Sweden is also limited by what it can convince the majority of the electorate to accept. At this time, there is a standoff. Proposals to move

beyond the welfare state, and there were such during the seventies, did not win a convincing majority. Therefore, quite properly, the Meidner plan (which would effectively have abolished capitalism through wage-earner funds) is on a back burner for the time being. I think it will be revived.

**T**he real question is: what would one need to see Sweden or any other country as moving toward socialism? My somewhat simplified answer is that Sweden would have to move in two major directions. The first is to effectively expand control over the workplace through councils that involve the vast majority of workers in making day-to-day decisions about their work life, personnel decisions, and the overall direction their enterprises should take. Such bodies should control management and be regarded as the economic counterpart to local self-government. The second is to abolish the present concentrations of private ownership. Mixed forms of property ownership—private, public, and cooperative—along the lines de-

scribed by Alec Nove make good sense. Clearly great concentrations of private wealth are incompatible with socialism or, for that matter, democracy. While very steep progressive taxation combined with an almost confiscatory inheritance tax could alleviate this problem, in the more advanced welfare states we still have the question of the social and political effects of great concentrations of wealth.

Gross differences in wealth and income are unacceptable from the point of view of either equity or democratic theory. Wealth tends to translate into political and social power. Democracy cannot exist in any meaningful sense when there are gross disparities in political power. That argument is so obvious and well established that it provides today the most effective language with which to express the socialist argument—the language of democracy. Thus my ultimate argument is that the welfare state should move in a socialist direction so as to complete the democratic transformation of society.

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### Ferenc Fehér and Agnes Heller

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**T**he demise of communism after the revolutions of 1989 has been, understandably, hailed by the right as the ultimate “proof” of the fiasco of the socialist idea as a whole. More surprising than the rightist glee is the self-querying mood of many noncommunist socialists who, precisely now, want to find metaphysical or sociological “proofs” and “guarantees” of the survival and longevity of their movement. But there are no such guarantees. Every culture prior to ours harbored influential trends that at some point lost their vitality and vanished, for various reasons. Our culture is no exception. It is entirely in the hands of socialists here and now whether their great movement, which has molded modernity for two centuries, is doomed to extinction or whether socialism will find the inner energy for rejuvenation.

Viewed in perspective, social democrats and libertarian socialists of all hues should now

have ample reason for joy. The scarecrow, whose presence has always triggered the accusation of conspiring to introduce a government of terror, leveled against them whenever they proposed social change, is now gone. Yet it seems as though old-time democratic socialists, enemies of communism for reasons of principle, are anxious rather than relieved. This perplexity of (noncommunist) socialism is a highly revealing feeling, conveying the message that noncommunist socialism has not faced seriously the complex issue of the historic achievements and internal limitations of its own theory and politics. The critique of communism seemed to have spared socialism this unpleasant task, which can no longer be postponed.

Above all, socialism does not seem to have made an honest inventory of its contribution to the “normal” development of modernity. Even if socialists completely disinherit communism