

# SOCIALISM AND SOCIAL PROGRESS

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Socialism was not born in a vacuum. Nor has it arisen from the social and economic conditions resulting from the industrial revolution. Rather socialism as an ideal of emancipation has a more far-reaching historical perspective, through which the civilised people of the world have worked to organise their societies in accordance with the principles of personal dignity, freedom and equality.

## HISTORICAL PROGRESS

The history of Western civilisation is for the most part the history of a people intent on putting the democratic ideal into practice. Since the birth of this concept in Greek civilisation to the development of the principles of law in classical Rome, to the establishment of bases for democratic representation in the French Revolution and the subsequent upheavals caused by social revolutions, it can be said that there exists a common cause which has been advancing our societies within a humanistic project based on the relation of freedom to equality. This meant overcoming basic inequalities in rights (slavery versus freedom) and in power (despotic and authoritarian domination versus political participation). It first advanced the notion of personal dignity and equality before the law, then the parliamentary

forms of democracy (common law states) and later social democracy (welfare states). We now are reaching the most advanced stages of social equality and democratic participation.

Beyond the specific historical events and actual socialist political projects, there are many movements which form part of this general line of progress in history, each with its own momentary breakdowns and setbacks. What can the people of our era do to contribute to this progress in history? Are the European countries at present in a position to take another giant step in the advancement of civilisation? Despite some negative pronouncements, the truth is that never before in the history of humanity has there been such a strong ethical awareness in the world, due precisely to the immediacy with which televised information reaches our homes. This ethical awareness increasingly acts as a brake and a limitation on violence and oppression.

The European countries, especially, are showing signs of a certain maturity with regard to advancing this civilised perspective. The extension of education on a scale never previously known, the spread of certain levels of social welfare and economic prosperity, the considerable possibilities for economic and scientific development opened up by the ongoing technological revolution, as well as the growing democratic and egalitarian mentality, make Europe a

privileged area for the deepening of democracy. Thus, it can be said to some extent that current conditions allow us to accept new challenges for historical progress and social advancement. But paradoxically, these favourable conditions, despite the fact that they coincide with an effective awareness that we are living in a period of great change and opportunity, have yet to become an innovating force in the field of political ideas. For the most part we remain anchored in debates that took place over a century ago, resolving questions that were posed in societies considerably different from those of today.

Those of us who are part of intellectual movements – like socialism – and who have the conviction that these ideas change the world, are bound to feel perplexed at the climate of ideological withdrawal which has occurred in certain political and intellectual circles over the past years, and in whose wake we still find ourselves. It is true that if we contemplate the progress of civilisation with sufficient historical perspective we must agree that ideas, arising from certain conditions, can change the world. But in the same way we must recognise also that ‘ideological’ sanctification may make of them a fetish, and enslave them. Therefore any attempt to petrify and ‘staunch the flow’ of ideas, inhibiting their free flow and expansion, ends up being an attack against history and against the possibilities of social progress. Historical experience shows, however, that all strong movements of ideas tend to become consecrated and stagnant. This tendency is often found to be in direct relation to the very strength of the original ideas (dependent on its most important demands) and also to the success they gained (at the level of hegemony and social impact). Thus it can be said that, in a certain way, the success (whether theoretical or practical is another question) of the movement of ideas runs parallel to a process of social inertia, which in turn tends to make them lifeless.

This is probably the only way to understand the accelerating crisis Marxism has experienced in recent years. It is a result both of the erosion caused by the passing of time and more than a few ‘hard contrasts with the facts’. For the most part, beyond the practical failures, many intellectuals and politicians have experienced this crisis as a clear awareness of the limitations of the ideology that – in some form or another – the majority of European leftists have believed in for so many years. The peculiar thing about this ideological crisis is that it has not occurred as a consequence of the emergence of a more opera-

tive alternative model; it has not been a logical result of an exterior defeat or of an empirically demonstrated improvement over the model, as we could have been led to expect from the concepts of scientific revolutionary theorists like Thomas Kuhn. Rather, for the most part, it has been the result of an awareness of the inadequacies of both theoretical and practical experience. The primary consequence of this crisis, as far as it exists, is that it leaves – or could leave – an appreciable political vacuum and that it causes – or could cause – a significant gap in the theoretical defences of socialism in the future (more important than the possible irreversibility of various historical conquests). In this manner, an ideological vacuum tends to be substituted at times by short-sighted and commonplace pragmatisms, or – even worse – by a bastardised and mediocre exaltation of the established historical order: neo-conservatism.

Nevertheless, we would be wrong to underestimate the grave risks for the future of socialism, and for the possibilities of advancing the progress of human history in the long term. Recently, some neo-conservative theorists have developed a line of argument which, though weak, is able to convince some of those people who live comfortably in the prosperous societies of the Western world. The message transmitted to these citizens is intended to be a message of security, based on the memory of the uprisings and conflicts of the period between the wars, and the harmful, and sometimes aberrant, consequences of fascism, Stalinism, and other revolutions which left violence and human grief in their wake. By creating a negative echo which stirs the memory of these events and of the experiences of ‘real socialism’, the neo-conservatives’ argument ‘warns’ against the risks and uncertainties of ‘daring’ social and economic experiments. In this way, democratic capitalism is presented as the ‘most reasonable’ social model or even as the ‘least bad’ form known in the history of humanity; the model – they say – that has avoided the ‘big mistakes’, that has ‘guaranteed’ greater levels of freedom and political stability, and has permitted the highest level of collective prosperity ever known. For this reason the neo-conservative theorists demand the uncompromising maintenance of a social system which – they say – ‘has had good objective results’. Therefore, it only seems necessary to ‘redesign’ small details.

In reality, this line of argument – which elicits a certain response in time of great social and technological change – is attempting to ‘conse-

crate' in practice a type of 'grey ending of history'. It assumes a political and moral 'paralysis' and generates fear in the face of the uncertainties and risks involved in taking innovative action for the future. The oversimplified arguments of Fukuyama have attempted to lay the foundations for an alleged end of history, interpreting the current crisis in communist countries as a 'knock-out' victory for 'liberalism'. This will thus become consecrated as the 'perfect political and economic order', without an alternative ideology or an organised system capable of presenting alternatives. In this way, some prophets of the end of history lock themselves into a provincial perspective which confuses the end of contrasting ideas with the crisis of their Cold War opponents. They confuse the end of the Cold War in practice with the disappearance of any variety in the way in which different social systems are organised.

From a more general perspective, such picturesque ways of presenting the question of the end of history may influence some people in countries which have already reached a certain level of material prosperity and social welfare. Their negative effect is a dampening of the ability – and the enthusiasm – to support the development of policies for innovation and change. This cooling in political and ideological interest is reinforced by a growing awareness of the political and economic failure of the countries of 'real socialism', and by signs of ideological exhaustion exhibited by the traditional approaches of social democracy. However, what this approach ignores are the possibilities that the communist countries' capacity for self-reform, and the social democratic parties' capacity to bring about successfully their renovation and ideological revitalisation, will end up operating as significant counter-devices for these negative and sterilising tendencies, based precisely on their ability to introduce a more realistic framework, which is more open to the possibilities of the future.

The move towards a meaningful reform of traditional communism, and the accumulation of governing experience among the European social democratic parties – together with their formulation of specific social policies – are factors that, in the medium term, will work in favour of gaining a more attractive public image for socialist options in general, thus increasing its ability to operate as an alternative ideology to that of liberal capitalism. In reality, if it were not for the extraordinary publicity it has gained, the neo-conservatives' pretensions to proclaim the end of history should be considered as a barely plausible

hypothesis which hardly deserves to be refuted. Real historical experience shows how enormously difficult it is to contain and control the dynamic possibilities of change implicit in all human organisation; although there have been cases in the past where it has been possible to slow them down considerably.

Socialism, like all socially transforming initiatives, has contributed effectively to the progress of forms of social organisation. With an overall perspective of developing and deepening democracy, through the recognition of social fissures, contradictions and the unfulfilled possibilities existing in society, it has brought about the introduction of social, political and economic organisational methods based on freedom, equality, justice, solidarity, harmonious development, etc. In this sense, the neo-conservative attempt to staunch the flow of historical progress is profoundly wrong. This is irrespective of how long a model for a particular political system is able to exist and be successful in certain countries (including taking into account the cost of marginalising significant social and national sectors). From an overall viewpoint, it seems evident that the risks of social readjustment have not come to an end. We are a long way from resolving the problem of deficiencies and ignorance suffered by the better part of the planet's inhabitants, nor have we been able to consolidate a civilisation free of personal and collective risks. Many battles remain to be won in all the corners of the world: battles to overcome the conditions of misery, ignorance and personal unhappiness in which millions of human beings live, to achieve a greater personal and collective quality of life, to reach open, participative and stable political systems, and above all to guarantee an adequate ecological and environmental balance.

Thus, the tasks of socialism are in large part unfinished. They can only be successfully undertaken after adequately renovating and updating the theoretical ideas and political policies. Consequently, we can say that the need for theoretical reflection is now just as important as it was at the beginning of socialism when, like all intellectual movements, it arose out of intense and lively debate, and at a time in the history of humanity when faith in the possibilities of reason and human progress was at its peak. It is in this sense that we can say that socialism inherited the spirit of the Enlightenment, and that the spirit of freedom gave rise to the spirit of socialism.

The history of socialism has been punctuated by periods of deep reflection and theoretical

debate, not only because socialism is embedded in a strong intellectual tradition, which in itself has provided an ideological motivation, but also because its historical reality has been based on the adjustment of the theory – of its main principles – to the concrete reality of each country and each particular period. The works of Bernstein, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Lenin, the Fabians, etc., are a result of the debates which took place in certain countries during these particular moments, and are a result of the effort to apply the general principles of socialism to the practical reality. In the same way we can say that the theoretical debate, the effort to construct a theory that served as a guide for political action, has played a very significant role in socialist activities. In recent years, nevertheless, the impact of critical revision on all areas of socialist political thought – which left intellectuals have actively participated in – has been impressive.

The evaluations and ideas expressed in the literature available to us today on the socialist theorists of the past, present a tremendously critical panorama: the forebears of socialism are described as being somewhat utopian and pre-scientific; the libertarians are considered naïve; Marx would be credited with a long list of mistakes; Kautsky, as we know, was called a 'renegade', Bernstein a 'traitor' and an 'opportunist'; Lenin has been criticised for his dictatorial inflection; Rosa Luxemburg is said to have been a slave to social illusion, and Trotsky was dogmatic. 'Real socialism' is defined, at best, as a sad parody of true socialism, while the social democratic experience of the postwar period has been subjected to all kinds of criticisms and discredit. Yet socialism is still alive in the hopes and consciousness of millions of human beings, and is evident in the results of practical work which has undoubtedly made notable historical advances.

It is certainly the case, then, that when we take stock of our legacy, the socialists of our time do not arrive by any means empty-handed. Over the last century historic socialism is written onto some of the most important pages in the development and progress of humanity, and has contributed with its efforts to the correction of many perverse and degrading lines of social evolution. But after more than a century of effort, and from the perspective of today, when we rigorously and honestly review what is still valid and useful among the theoretical baggage inherited from socialism, one cannot help but feel a strong sensation of lack and insufficiency. After all the important changes that have occurred during

recent decades, and all the processes of adaptation and adjustment that arose from the Second World War, the technological revolution now underway is altering many of the beliefs and concepts of socialism in such a way as to underline the need to develop new approaches to socialist theory which can successfully fill the gaps left in the theoretical structure formulated by the classical masters of socialist thought over a century ago by the criticisms of left intellectuals.

Our current shortcomings and inadequacies require us to reformulate:

- An alternative to existing models of highly imperfect societies (socialism as ideology);
- A concept of the subject – or subjects – capable of promoting socialism (socialism as a social movement);
- The relevant actions for promoting socialist progress (strategies).

To use a metaphor, this means, in short, the rewriting (and updating) of the script, of thinking of new performers, and of acting in accordance with new dramatic methods and techniques. Actually, the who, what, and how of socialism are not separable elements, but rather form part of the same entity. It was their divorce and separation which led to errors and mistakes in the past. However, for analysing these core aspects it is necessary to employ a method of segmentation.

#### WHAT SOCIALISM? RETHINKING SOCIALISM

The changes in economic, social and political circumstances affect socialism both as a social movement and as a 'body of ideas and hopes'. The socialism of the twenty-first century can no longer be understood or explained in the same way as the socialism of the end of the nineteenth century. This is not only because of the impact of social changes, but also, significantly, because the level and type of aspirations, needs, demands and possibilities are not the same in technologically advanced societies as in those societies that were undergoing the transition from traditional agriculture to capitalist industrialism. Over time it is not only the nature and character of inequality and needs that have been modified. Collective hopes and aims have changed, due in part to the upsurge of new problems, and in part to the appearance of new opportunities and demands brought into existence by past successes. All this implies a more demanding and wide-ranging conception of

socialism, less tied to the specific conditions of the societies which gave birth to the grand theories of socialism in the past. This also applies to the objectives of socialism. Besides which, socialism must be understood, in the broadest and most open way possible, as one of the fundamental elements of human progress and social dynamism. It is in this sense that we can define socialism as a liberating ideal of a progressive extension and deepening of freedom and equality. Socialism aims to change those social relations and organisations which result in inequality, unmet needs and social domination. It aims to set up new forms of social organisation in which the practical possibilities for social life can be extended, based on the full development of human potentialities, on creativity, innovation, brotherhood and cooperation. That is what human progress is about.

However, the problem consists not only of how we can understand or define socialism, but how we can affect the manner in which we think about socialism. In the first place, the socialism of the future cannot be understood as the mere process of travelling cautiously along a meandering path with no goal or precise objective, with an unknown destination. But neither can we think of socialism as a crystallised and concrete model detailing all the facets of an alternative society. In truth, if we make a simplistic reduction of the metaphors that were used historically to explain the two main methods for achieving socialism, we find ourselves dealing with the substratum of a certain elemental process frequently found in infantile dreams. Because of this, it is not difficult to make either a Freudian interpretation of the social democratic ideal of socialism as a misty path to be trodden cautiously, or an interpretation of the Leninist concept of socialism as the act of conquering a castle – a type of fairytale castle in the clouds which sometimes ends up turning itself into a nightmarish castle full of dungeons. But the socialism needed today can neither be explained in terms of infantile dreams nor as a fairytale. Neither the idea of misty paths nor castles in the clouds can now serve as illustrative references for socialism in the coming decades.

The model of future socialism, as far as being a reference model is concerned, must be a guide for action. But to qualify the earlier metaphor, it cannot aspire to provide a finished script ahead of time, with rigid, detailed stage instructions supposedly valid for all time and every situation. The model of socialism that we need must provide

an open base of reference and be dialectically adjustable. It cannot be a lexicon of *a priori* 'ideas', but it must give specific social reference for practical 'confrontation' of inequality, domination, dependency and alienation. Socialism hopes to channel tension into emancipation. The conquest of the 'enchanted castle' is nothing other than childish daydreaming.

Secondly, another important change for socialist thought is the need to admit fully the complexity of reality. If the historical development of social organisation points to a clear tendency of the simple evolving into the complex, then the truth now is that this tendency is undergoing an extraordinary acceleration and accentuation as a result of the technological revolution. One has only to look back a little to compare the diversity, heterogeneity and complexity of the societies of our day with the agricultural societies of just a century ago, or with the first forms of industrial organisation. Thus, it is unreal and naïve to think of socialism in terms of simplistic solutions for societies as a whole; still less for the societies of the future. In this sense, socialist theories have to traverse the path travelled by modern science and abandon any pretence of being able to think in terms of a single, grand theory, a macro-synthesis of knowledge, a search for uni-causal explanations, or of only one route to a single destination, with one, and only one, reference model.

The challenge faced by the new perspectives – once they are firmly installed in the complex reality – is how to integrate the possible with what is real. In other words, how can we give a clear meaning to the complex social elements which are the basis for initiating the changes which will advance socialism. A socialist project for the future which does not resort to self-deception is destined to lose in *simplicity* and *clarity* what it will gain in *reality* and *veracity*. It will also be necessary to draw up a socialist plan of action that can be communicated in such a way as to give clear and intelligible messages, both sociologically and politically. Undoubtedly, the problem is not easily solved, especially at a time of intense social and technological change. There is little to be gained from simply referring to the explanatory models used by modern science in order to uncover the principal lines of contradiction and domination that may aid the process of emancipation in this complex world.

The accompanying diagram represents the principles of both contradiction and domination elements in a very provisional form, and gives no more than the beginnings of a provisional

**DIAGRAM OF THE CONTRADICTION-DOMINATION NETWORK IN INDUSTRIALISED SOCIETIES**  
(Possible social bases for the motivating agents of future socialism)

|   | CLASS  |  |  | INFRACLASSES   |   |  | SOCIAL-SECTORIAL   |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|---|--|--|--|
|   | Economy  | Power  | Status   | Sex  | Age   | Nature   | Civic-Political Culture  |  |
| Type of domination/contradiction                | Class domination/economic exploitation   | Alienation as political 'estrangement'   | Marginalisation of opportunities and of standard social means  | The logic of subordination-dependence of sexes in social relations   | Social estrangement as segregation from labour market with infrapositioning of power and devaluation of standard of living  | Contradiction between maximising economic growth and the preservation of the environment and natural resources   | Confrontation between emerging personal attitudes and overall transnational tendencies   |  |
| Subject of the domination                       | Working classes (in their entirety)  | Unions and professional and interest associations (like formal groups) (bureaucracies) citizens without power  | Shortage groups (low income, education, etc.) and marginal sectors   | Socially subordinated and dependent women  | The youngest and the oldest   | Residents of deteriorated zones<br>Future generations  | Sensitised population sectors (pacifism)<br>Population in general  |  |
| Causes (roots of the domination)                | Traditional capitalist relationships of ownership and appropriation of surplus   | Lack or insufficiency of objective and subjective spheres of contradiction and of social and political power-sharing   | Insufficient development of assistential and compensating policies due to collecting limitations (translation in taxes and availability of wealth) | Cultural or institutional subordination and economic, labour, legal and political dependencies, etc. (neopatriarch, authoritarian hierarchy)   | Segregation of youth from labour market (structural unemployment/labour restrictions) less job opportunities<br>Discrimination of retirees (do not improve standard of living at the same pace and in the same way as those with stable jobs) | Application of overall economic production criteria and the devoting use of natural resources, without efficient self-control mechanisms that guarantee ecological balance<br>Devaluing conception of human labour (like subjugating domination of nature) | Risks from arms race<br>Risks from bipolarisation<br>Risks from allotting areas of influence among superpowers<br>Risks from international inequalities and imbalances   |  |
| Goals of emancipation (participation)           | Formula for sharing in the ownership (or in the holding/management/self-regulation) and in the profits (individual salary increases or overall improvement in the quality of life)   | Increase in participation (via coincidence of internal political parties by agreement or instrumentalisation, or overall social agreements with unlawful holders of power<br>Institutionalisation of contradiction channels. (Social Economic Council, etc.) | Assure social minimums<br>Operationally develop welfare state policies   | Equality of sexes in education, labour, institutional, and political opportunities, etc.<br>Antidiscriminatory cultural change<br>Greater participation and micro and macro sociological co-responsibilities | More job opportunities for youth (incorporation into job market)<br>More investment in fostering jobs and quality of life<br>Social welfare and quality of life policies for retirees   | New economic rationale ('self-controlling')<br>New production orientation (conservationist)<br>Balance between economic growth objectives and environmental protection   | International peace and detente policies<br>Evolution from bipolarity to multipolarity<br>International cooperation and solidarity policies                              |  |
| Central theme                                   | More equality  | More participation   | More social equity   | More social symmetry (equality)  | More solidarity   | More environmental and social protection   | Peace and solidarity   |  |
| Formal implicated/competitive groups            | Political working class parties versus established economic powers   | Unions and partial, collective, sectorial, consumer, business interest groups, etc.) versus representatives elected by popular will. Unions and consumers versus established economic powers   | Shortage and/or un-assisted groups versus groups that now participate (or exert more pressure in the 'cutting of the cake')                        | 'Autonomous' feminist groups versus 'political' feminist groups versus discriminatory-segregating forces   | Youth groups and retirees' associations versus collective, non-solidary unionising wage-earners   | Groups revolving around an awareness of ecological matters versus national and international groups based on financial interests   | Sector having a greater awareness of the goals of the pacifist movement and of peoples under the domination of others versus large powers and associated interest groups |  |
| a) Social and political effects<br>b) Worldwide | Social theory: Sociopolitical theory of overall social system dependency (far reaching historical perspective)<br>Political theory: Political strategy to bring together sectorial interests in line with the deepening of democracy |  | more freedom<br>more equality<br>more participation<br>more solidarity<br>more social and environmental balance                                    |  |   |  |  |  |
| Political Parties                               | Social movements<br>Extensive socialist party and pluralistic in   | ideological analysis models<br>sectorialisation → N.M.S.<br>transnational activity   |  |  |   |  |  |  |

of the dominated-alienated

analysis. It leaves out the fundamental question of determining the power lines of social 'dramatisation and symbolisation', from which it would be possible to identify and aggregate individual interests. Only then would it be feasible to identify the respective social forces and thus compensate for the centrifugal tendencies and the mutual neutralisation of social pressures. Perhaps one should begin by asking which groups may, in the future, be interested in supporting a political project which would initiate socialist ideals in a practical way. This leads us – in view of everything discussed so far – to the central question of identifying the actors for the new script.

### WHICH ACTORS?

For some time changes in the class structure have given rise to uncertainty and theoretical imprecision, reminiscent of the famous works of Pirandello, in which the characters (the plural working class) wandered from place to place in search of an author. The difference today is that it is as if the author, faced with the difficulty of finding convincing characters, has decided to do without them altogether. Is a future socialist project possible without specific social characters? Can socialism be understood as an autonomous idea which goes beyond the social network of given societies? Can the characters of socialism in the twenty-first century be the same as those imagined by the great theorists of the nineteenth century? This is an essential question which we cannot simply ignore either in theory or in practice.

The transformation of the economy has evidently modified both the nature of inequality and the composition of the social groups which, objectively and subjectively, are the most interested in overcoming the new forms of inequality and social asymmetry existing today. This does not mean that the traditional classes, which are now better integrated into society, have altered their social allegiance. But the fact is that the complexity of the system of inequality (the greater internal stratification within the working class, the emergence of dual inequality systems, the appearance of 'infra-classes', of new marginalised sectors, etc.) gives rise to an increase in the contradictions and potential divergence of interests between the older, more integrated, social groups and those new groups that suffer most from the shortages and shortcomings of the social imbalance of transforming societies. The

simplicistic traditional image of socialism, as class confrontation between different and clearly identified subjects, must be replaced by a far more flexible image, and above all by a clear understanding that the reaction to conflictual situations is going to depend on a greater diversification of the variables and on more complex cross-alignments. In today's societies we are already witnessing secondary conflicts of interest which significantly influence the social and political conflicts which we consider to be of principal strategic value. My diagram, in this sense, may seem clear. But it is not difficult to anticipate that various conflicts of interest between groups occupying different social positions could, in due course, give rise to a very different outcome.

Logically a socialist approach should lead us to search for ways of reconciling, rather than confronting, the new individual or group interests, many of which have yet to overcome the old forms of dependency and alienation. But present experience demonstrates a tendency towards an increase of potential contradictions, especially in societies that are the most complex and heterogeneous. Certainly, we are far removed from Marx's conception of the traditional working class becoming the social majority. There are now sufficient objective conditions for socialism to reject the idea of a single revolutionary subject. Thus we have reason to question the lack of real consistency in the theory of a single revolutionary subject which many socialists and communists have believed in for many years. Despite the writings of Marx on specific class analyses and his economic approach to it, we can now see that it was nothing more than a political recourse. It was based neither on the empirical data nor on the logic of the economy, which was understood by Marx in a much more complex way.

The theoretical weakness of the concept of a revolutionary subject – and its sociological frailty in practice – ended in some cases by postulating an additional 'super-force' (the idea of a 'proletarian dictatorship', militarisation and bureaucratisation of the 'vanguard party', etc.). None of this would have been necessary if, in practice, the working class had become as strong and as homogenous a force in social, economic and political terms as the theory had assumed. The solution was a forced response, which too often led to aberrations. Many of the revolutions carried out in the name of socialism (in Russia, China, etc.) were made precisely in agricultural, rather than industrial, countries and relied very little on industrial workers. The fact that the

