

Reflections on Twenty-First Century Socialism

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In order to explore the perspectives for socialism in the 21st century, it is essential to recover some of the basic postulates, which inform the socialist project. In addition, it is important to recover some of the basic advances achieved by 20th century socialist regimes as well as to critically reflect on their distorted structures and failed policies.

In the most basic sense it is important to remember that 'socialism' is a means to a better material life than under capitalism: Higher living standards, greater political freedom, social equality of conditions, and internal and external security. 'Respect', 'dignity' and 'solidarity' can only be understood as accompaniments of these basic material goals, not as substitutes. 'Respect' and 'dignity' cannot be pursued in the face of long-term, large-scale deprivation, sacrifice and delayed fulfillment of material improvement. Governments claiming to be 'socialist' which idealize 'sacrifice' of material living standards in the name of abstract principles of justice, are more akin to 'spiritual socialism' of a religious order rather than a modern dynamic socialist government.

Social transformations and the replacement of capitalist owners by the socialist state can only be justified if the new order can improve the efficiency, working conditions and responsiveness to consumers of the socialist enterprise. For example, in some socialist regimes, under the guise of a 'revolutionary offensive', the state intervened and eliminated thousands of small and medium size retail urban enterprises in the name of 'eliminating capitalists'. The result was a disaster: The stores remained closed; the state was incapable of organizing the multitude of small businesses and the great majority of workers were deprived of vital services.

Twentieth century socialist states built effective and successful medical, educational and security systems to serve the majority of the workers. The majority of socialist states eliminated foreign control and exploitation of natural resources and in some cases developed diversified industrial economies. On the whole living standards rose, crime declined, employment, pensions and welfare were secured. However 20th century socialism was divided by deep contradictions leading to profound systemic crises. Bureaucratic centralism denied freedom at the workplace and restricted public debate and popular governance. Public authority's over-emphasis on 'security' blocked innovation, entrepreneurship, scientific and popular initiatives leading to technological stagnation and mass passivity. Elite material privileges based on political office led to profound inequalities, which undermined popular belief in socialist principles and led to the spread of capitalist values.

Capitalism thrives on social inequalities; socialism deepens through greater equality. Both capitalism and socialism depend on efficient, productive and innovative workers: The former

in order to maximize profits, the latter to sustain an expanding welfare state.

20th Century lessons for 21st Century socialists

21st century socialist can learn from the achievements and failures of 20th century socialism.

First: Policies must be directed toward improving the living as well as working conditions of the people. That means massive investment in quality housing, household appliances, public transport, environmental concerns and infrastructure. Overseas solidarity and missions should not take priority over large-scale, long-term investments in expanding and deepening material improvements for the principal internal class base of the socialist regime. Solidarity begins at home.

Second: Development policies should focus on diversifying the economy with a special focus on industrializing the raw material, making major investment in industries producing quality goods of mass consumption (clothing, shoes, and so on) and in agriculture, especially becoming self-sufficient in basic essential foods. Under no conditions should socialist economies rely on single products for income (sugar, tourism, petroleum, nickel), which are subject to great volatility.

A Socialist government should finance education, income and infrastructure policies, which are compatible with its high economic social and cultural priorities; this means educating agronomists and skill agricultural workers, skilled construction workers (plumbers, electricians, painters) and civil engineers, transport workers and urban and rural planners of public housing to decentralize mega-cities and substitute public for private transport. They should set up popularly elected environment and consumer councils to oversee the quality of air, water and noise levels and the availability, prices and quality of food.

Twentieth century socialist governments frequently alienated their workers by diverting large of amount of aid to overseas regimes (many of whom were not even progressive!). As a result, local needs were neglected in the name of 'international solidarity'. The first priority of 21st century socialism is solidarity at home. Twentieth century socialists emphasized 'welfare' from above - government as 'giver' and the masses as 'receivers' - discouraging local action and encouraging passivity. Twenty-first century socialism must encourage autonomous class action to counter privileged 'socialist' bourgeois ministers and functionaries who use their office to accumulate and protect private wealth through public power. Autonomous popular organizations can expose the hypocrisy of rich ministers who attack well-paid industrial workers as 'privileged' while riding in chauffeured Mercedes and enjoying luxurious apartments, second and third 'vacation homes' and who send there children to expensive and exclusive private schools at home and abroad.

Above all socialism is about social equality: Equality in income, schools and hospitals; equality between classes and within classes. Without social equality, all talk of 'diversity', 'dignity' and 'respect' is meaningless. Capitalists also support 'diversity', as long as it does not affect their profits and wealth. Socialists support income and property equality which effectively re-distributes wealth and property to all workers, white and black, Indian farmer and urban worker, men and women, and young and old. There is no 'dignity' in being poor and exploited; dignity comes with struggle and the achievement of socialist goals of social equality and rising living standards.

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