

In the less than two hundred years of ideology recognisable as socialism, there have been almost as many kinds of socialism as there have been socialist thinkers. As an ideology, socialism encompasses a wide range of movements each with their own version of the true socialism vision. Inevitable with such broad dissent being the nature of the beast, internecine conflicts loom large in its history and thought to the present day. Neo-Marxist criticism of current social democracy is the continuation of a century long conflict between those following basically Marxist doctrines, and those who would seek either to reject or revise Marxian ideas to increase their relevance to their time and circumstances.

Neo-Marxism inherits the full Marxist tradition embodied in the writings of Marx and Engels, and despite recent instances of deviation¹ remains a revolutionary ideology defined in terms of only minor variations from orthodoxy². Social democracy as it has developed is now opposed to much of what is considered Marxist, in that they embrace democracy for example, play down the class struggle and certainly reject revolution³. I will outline the criticisms Marxists have laid at the door of social democracy and respond to their case for social democracy.

To a neo-Marxist, social democracy's crime is that it is just not Marxist. Marxism has been revised and refuted such that its core of scientific socialism is ignored and so that they opportunistically collaborate with the capitalist state and its parliamentary system. The class struggle is treated as if they hope no one will notice their abandonment of the proletariat, and they lack the will to fight for revolution. They provide a false hope for socialism without the pain, which can achieve nothing.

Historical materialism is at the centre of Marxist thought. It lifted socialism from utopian dreams to a science. As summarised by Engels

...the final causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought not in man's brains, not in man's better insight in to eternal truth and justice, but

¹ Kramnick, I., and Watkins, F.M., The Age of Ideology, 2nd ed., New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1979, p. 96.

² Gamble, A., An Introduction to Modern Social and Political Thought, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1981, p. 216.

³ Christenson, R.M., Engel, A.S., Jacobs, D.N., Rejai, M., and Waltzer, H., Ideologies and Modern Politics, New York, Dodd, Mead and Company, 1971, p. 256.

in changes in the mode of production and exchange. They are to be sought not in the philosophy, but in the economics of each particular epoch.⁴ (Engel's emphasis.)

The key error of democratic socialism is to allow a multicausal analysis of society⁵, giving emphasis to what is in reality merely superstructure as well as the economic substructure. Social democracy has denied the materialistic nature of society and in direct contrast to Engel's, their solutions proceed "from the will and efforts of man"⁶ rather than the dialectic. This sows the seeds of opportunism as actions can be justified in the name of political expedience even if in conflict with the final aims of the working classes.

From the rejection of historical materialism, social democracy proceeds to de-emphasise the class struggle. Without the dialectic there can be no confidence in an ever growing and ever more exploited proletariat, inevitably becoming class conscious and finally overthrowing their capitalist oppressor. Their confidence in a victorious class struggle can not survive and so they have no choice but to replace class warfare with doing as much toward resolving inequality within the state as they can. Without class conflict as a sharply focussed idea, they lose their stomach and will for revolution and settle for the soft but illusory road of democracy. They claim to espouse a desire for equality, but ignore that within the capitalist system there can be no equality between the oppressor and the oppressed.⁷

Democratic socialism's rejection of revolution has condemned the movement to impotence, and worse, hindrance of the proletarian cause. While capitalism must eventually collapse, to the inevitable benefit of the masses, social democracy by working within the framework of the state can only delay the catastrophe. Bernstein's works, "the first attempt to give a theoretical basis to opportunistic streams of thought"⁸, provide his classical betrayal of Marxian thought, "the

⁴ Engels, F., in Feuer, L.S., Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy, Aylesbury, Fontana, 1984, p. 131.

⁵ Sibley, M.Q., Political Ideas and Ideologies, New York, Harper and Row, 1970, p. 531.

⁶ Christenson, op.cit.

⁷ Lenin, V., quoted in Hallowell, J.M., Main Currents in Modern Political Thought, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950.

⁸ Luxemburg, R., quoted in Gay, D., The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism, New York, Collier Books, 1962, p. 263.

movement is everything, our goal nothing”⁹, the proposition that reformist aspirations outweigh the need for revolution and the final aims of socialism. Such a movement can have no direction, and would allow any compromise with bourgeois capitalist interests for reform’s sake. Short term and relatively minor improvements of the lot of the masses from such efforts serve only to make them more comfortable in their oppressed state¹⁰, slow the development of class consciousness and delay the process of history¹¹.

The hope of socialism via election is an impossible dream of men unwilling to pay the inevitable price involved in revolution. Lanski held that,

A capitalist democracy will not allow its electorate to stumble into socialism by the accident of a verdict at the polls.¹²

Avoidance of revolution and incidental violence only means coming to power in a state with the framework of the ruling class intact, inviting violent overthrow of the elected socialist government if attempts to implement socialist policies are made. The lesson of the Allende government is that socialism requires revolution. You cannot vote in a socialist government and expect it to provide socialist policies and survive.

Socialist democracy once committed to parliamentary institutions, participating with the enemies of the proletariat, is at the mercy of corruption and electoralism. Entering elected assemblies ties the prestige of the party to electoral support and militates against unpopular but necessary decisions. Instead of leading the masses to class consciousness, the party drifts to whatever will not upset its constituency. This was a factor in the German Social Democratic Party changing from a party espousing Marxist views last century to a truly democratic socialist party in today’s sense.¹³ Corruption of both leaders and supporters of parliamentary social democratic parties have overridden the socialist aims of the party. Mandel alleges that pre World War One German Social Democrats refused to support general strikes while in positions of

⁹ Bernstein, F., quoted in Mandel, E, Introduction to Marxism, 2nd ed., London, Inks Links, 1979, p. 88.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Christenson, op.cit., p. 257.

¹² Lanski, H., quoted in Gay, op.cit., p.7.

¹³ Kramnick, op.cit., p. 67-68.

authority, to protect their positions and lifestyle.¹⁴ Australia's early labour government failed in their Marxist programme because the workers wanted "the right to put their hands into capitalist pockets, not the responsibility of administering their rightful heritage", and so lost crucial referenda.¹⁵

The gradualism favoured by social democrats is poison to the development of mass support. There is nothing to stir enthusiasm in asking oppressed workers to work within the system which keeps them down. The Fabians especially with their brand of dry emotionless reformism, appealing only to comfortable educated socialist, were at fault.¹⁶ Again this lack of appeal to the masses means social democracy is never likely to achieve real power.

Economically, democratic socialism has abandoned nationalisation as an aim, happy for limited nationalisation in a mixed economy, emphasising public control rather than ownership.¹⁷ In this, worker control of industry has been betrayed, and capitalism left alone and even encouraged. Attempts at control of capitalist run industry can only be illusory in a capitalist state, as being the ruling class; capitalists will allow control only to the extent that their interests are not threatened.

The influences of Marx on socialist thought have been such that those who would revise or oppose his views begin on the defensive. This often makes social democracy's reply to criticism low key and less emphatic than possible with the certainties of the dialectic. Nevertheless it is possible to make an effective case for the social democrats.

Democratic socialism's response to neo-Marxist critique is based on issues of practice. In reality it is history that has betrayed Marx, rather than his revisionists. The working classes of the West are now sufficiently prosperous as to make them poor revolutionaries, and when revolution in Marx's name has occurred, the sacrifices have led only to capitalism under state control. In the face of an imperfect world, social democracy's "rationalist optimism ... derived

¹⁴ Mandel, op.cit.

¹⁵ Hyams, E., The Millenium Postponed, London, Secker and Warburg, 1973, p. 117.

¹⁶ Berki, R.N., Socialism, London, J.M.Dent and Sons, 1975, p. 78.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 100.

from common sense and empirical observations of immediate facts”¹⁸ remains a valid form of socialist thought.

Marxist criticism of social democracy is based on the fact that it is not Marxist. It is not obvious why Marx is the only benchmark of socialist thought; as Berki says, “Why does socialism have to be Marxist?”¹⁹ He has argued that Marxism has never been the completely dominating ideology over the whole range of socialist thought, and concluded that,

a big question mark must therefore accompany all attempts to evaluate social democracy in purely Marxist terms.²⁰

For those to whom revisionism is not a dirty word, Bernstein has been described as providing “its finest exposition”.²¹ In a letter to a German Social Democratic Party, which for the most part opposed his views, in 1898, he set out his argument for revision of Marxism based on his observations. He noted that contrary to the expectations of orthodoxy, collapse of capitalism did not appear imminent; capital was not being concentrated with fewer individuals; and democracy was giving a voice to the working classes and that pressure was leading to useful social reform. He also argued that both Marx and Engels had seen the need to revise their own thinking throughout their lifetime.²² Since that time, Marxism has also been confounded by the resilience of capitalism, the increasing role of the state, the emergence of a powerful managerial class, and the continued relative prosperity of the workers in the West.²³ Bernstein’s case for revision and the impetus towards social democracy gets stronger as time progresses.

The emphasis on reform within existing states has been criticised by Marxists as interfering with the ultimate aims of socialism, but the reforms encouraged by democratic socialism via legislation have made for real advances for the masses and the world. Welfare, economic security, de-colonisation, détente, political freedom and toleration have been achieved both by

¹⁸ Gay, op.cit., p. 298.

¹⁹ Berki, op.cit., p. 107.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 102.

²¹ Gay, op.cit., p. 8.

²² Bernstein, E., Evolutionary Socialism, New York, Schocken Books, 1961, p. xxiii-xxxii.

²³ Berki, op.cit., p. 95-96.

social democrats and groups of other political shades influenced by the ideals of democratic socialism.²⁴ The wide acceptance of the humanitarian ideals of social democracy in the developed world may undermine the ideological appeal specifically for social democracy, but this is inevitable and not something that could be discouraged. It is unreasonable as well, to expect elected representatives to undermine efforts to improve the lot of their constituents, in pursuit of an ephemeral goal after the catastrophic downfall of capitalism.

The dreams of somehow transferring power to a “revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat”²⁵ have in practice been violent civil war and oppression on a wide scale. Even Engels wrote it in 1895 that “revolutions of small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses”²⁶ was a dated concept. A vanguard party can only work initially with violence as one of its weapons, and once in power maintain that power by oppression until the masses develop a like consciousness. This method has more to do with Jacobinism than Marxism, yet this was the course taken by Lenin in the name of Marx in 1917.²⁷

The Marxist states eventuating in the real world have a poor record living up to other Marxian ideals. They have become state capitalism, and oppression by bureaucracy and managerialism has produced according to Kautsky “the most oppressive of all despotism in Russian hitherto”.²⁸ In short, to quote Bernstein, Russia “brutalised Marx’s civilised doctrine”.²⁹ Historically, in the realm of tactics, democratic socialism has offered a civilised alternative to the violence of revolutionary bands in the socialist spectrum.

The commitment to democracy has been the alternative to revolution favoured by social democracy. Working through legislation social engineering can achieve an increase in rationality and thence promotion of socialist ideals.³⁰ Achieving these through peaceful persuasion and

²⁴ Berki, *op.cit.*, p. 94-97.

²⁵ Marx, K., quoted in Feuer, *op.cit.*, p. 169.

²⁶ Engels, F., in Bernstein, *op.cit.*, p. xxvi.

²⁷ Kramnick, *op.cit.*, p. 78.

²⁸ Kautsky, K., quoted in Berki, *op.cit.*, p. 100.

²⁹ Bernstein, E., in Gay, *op.cit.*, p. 295.

³⁰ Vaizey, I., Social Democracy, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, p. 212.

majoritarian democracy is an admittedly slow but often more permanent way of changing things than revolution, and avoids the brutality of civil unrest.³¹ The usefulness of assemblies as forums for discussion and as educational tools is recognised today even by such neo-Marxist groups as the Eurocommunists.³²

It has been advanced that Marx himself was more a democrat than a revolutionary. Harrington in a complex argument linking the growth and change of Marx's writings with historical events, argues that after 1850 Marx was disillusioned with revolution and saw the future in democracy.³³ While this remains controversial, Engels too, as previously noted, disavowed revolution late in his life.

In the mixed economy of the West, social democrats provide the only acceptable face of socialism likely to achieve wide community support. It can be argued that the reform and social justice platforms of democratic socialism always had more real working class support than revolution, amongst a proletariat more conservative than a traditional Marxist would have hoped.³⁴ Today the working class of the West wants "good wages, job security, insurance ... and personal dignity"³⁵, not workers' control of factories, nor even economic equality with their bosses. The relative prosperity of the working class in the developed West militates against the development of a revolutionary working class leaving social democracy as the viable alternative. Their support of a mixed economy provides the masses with the productive advantages of capitalism, while controlling the capitalists to prevent their excesses. The relative prosperity is not one worth risking by wholesale nationalisation for its own sake.

Both neo-Marxism and social democracy are socialist ideologies sharing many ideals. Neo-Marxist criticism of democratic socialism is fundamentally that it is not Marxism. Social democrats however do not wish to be Marxist and busy themselves working peacefully to

³¹ Berki, op.cit., p. 103.

³² Kramnick, op.cit., p. 95.

³³ Harrington, M., Socialism, New York, Saturday Review Press, 1970, p. 36-76.

³⁴ Berki, op.cit., p. 100.

³⁵ Christenson, op.cit., p. 276.

promote their platforms, and at being the conscience of the world. In the developed West social democracy's best response to Marxism is that their efforts have reduced class inequalities to the extent that neo-Marxism is an irrelevance to the vast majority. In developing nations however, without even relative prosperity for the masses, it is social democracy that appears irrelevant and the Marxist criticism of it much more appropriate and successful.

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