

the *meaning* of
socialism
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by *michael* luntley

The Meaning of Socialism

Michael Luntley



Duckworth

For Max

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The Meaning of Socialism

To allow the market mechanism to be sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment ... would result in the demolition of society ... Robbed of the protective covering of cultural institutions, human beings would perish from the effects of social exposure; they would die as the victims of acute social dislocation through vice, perversion, crime and starvation. Nature would be reduced to its elements, neighbourhoods and landscapes defiled, rivers polluted, military safety jeopardized, the power to produce food and raw materials destroyed. Finally, the market administration of purchasing power would periodically liquidate business enterprise, for shortages and surfeits of money would prove as disastrous to business as floods and droughts in primitive society ... no society could stand the effects of such a system ... unless its human and natural substance as well as its business organization was protected against the ravages of this satanic mill.

Karl Polanyi, *Origins of our Time:
The Great Transformation* (London 1945)

Preface

This book is about the theory of socialism. It is not a set of prescriptions of how we should go about constructing a socialist society. It is not a policy document outlining a socialist manifesto. It is about something more urgent. Ultimately it is concerned with one central question: Is it ever legitimate to interfere and regulate the market mechanisms of capitalism for some favoured end? Socialists the world over of many different persuasions engage in such interference and regulation and the fundamental problem facing socialists is the lack of confidence that this is legitimate. Such has been the core challenge to socialism across the developed industrial world. Until the challenge is answered no amount of detailed policy prescription will have a lasting effect on the condition of social life in the modern world. In this book I outline the only viable answer to this challenge. I outline the meaning of socialism.

I conceived of the idea for this book after the the 1983 UK election when the Thatcher administration achieved its second term of office. I was impelled to realise the conception after her third electoral success in 1987. I have tried throughout the argument to employ lessons and examples from recent political experience. Political theory is not an intellectual game. It matters terribly and I have tried to engage where it matters and bites in ordinary life as often as possible. But at heart, my concerns here are theoretical, for without a clear theoretical base, our daily concerns rarely ever get properly focussed.

I have been helped in formulating the arguments of this work by many people. The beginning of Mrs Thatcher's third term of office coincided with my introduction to the socialist philosophy group. While not agreeing with many of the group's individual and collective initiatives, I have learnt much from its discussions and have gained from presenting parts of this work to the group on two occasions. For comments, criticisms

and suggestions that I can recollect, I thank Richard Bellamy, Ross Brennan, Howard Caygill, Gerry Cohen, Mark Hope, Fred Inglis, Nigel Kemp, Liam O'Sullivan, Phil Wheatley and John Willman. For the past two years I have been fortunate to have David Wiggins as a colleague. The measured calm of his approach to matters of moral and political philosophy has done much to temper my own more headstrong approach even if it is not apparent in these pages. But I have learned much from him and I am grateful for it.

With our universities in disrepair and scholars of every persuasion fleeing the land in such of fresher pastures where the intellectual life is valued for its own sake, I am acutely aware of the debt I owe the British Academy for providing the support, in the form of a post-doctoral research fellowship, that enabled me to write this book. It is a salutary thought that, under the proposed reforms of the universities under market criteria of success, relevance and efficiency, there may soon be a time when the sorts of theoretical pursuits recorded in this book will be erased from our campuses. These are hard times for anyone working outside those fields that satisfy the narrowly philistine preoccupations of our present masters. I wrote this book so that we might have a better notion of how to bring to an end the current barrenness in our society and make plain that the option of doing so is within our grasp.

This book is dedicated to the memory of my father. I was too young to know of his politics, let alone understand them, when he was alive. I now know that he would have approved of this project and hope others may join in our common purpose.

December 1988
University College, Oxford

M.L.

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Introduction

Socialism is in crisis. That much at least is clear. And beyond that is all manner of confusion. This brief book is an attempt to put together a vision of what socialism might be and become and of how we might overcome the confusion and the faltering struggle to keep an alternative agenda going through the ravages of the renewal of Right-wing politics and theory. My aim is simply this: to provide a clear but rigorous statement of the theoretical base and aims of socialism and to do this in a manner that provides a politics fit to survive and flourish into the next century. Much is at stake, for if my arguments are right, if the project fails we will see not just the demise of a cluster of political parties and the thwarted aspirations of a sizeable chunk of our polity, we will see the demise of the very possibility that our society will find a way to live according to the dictates of our moral senses and reason. A central thesis advanced in these pages is the identification of socialism with the possibility of our achieving a society shaped by moral forces, not by the caprice of Capital. I shall elaborate and defend this identification shortly. I believe it is right, but I acknowledge that its correctness vastly raises the stakes in the attempt to trace the meaning of socialism.

The task is a philosophical one. What is currently lacking on the Left is a clear and compelling account of the *ideas* that underpin socialist policy. The signal achievement of the new Right and, in the UK, of Mrs Thatcher's government in particular, has been the way that policy initiatives have all flowed from a simple consistent vision of the nature of society and the role of individuals within it. The Right has, for the moment, achieved a lucid if naïve clarity about the social world and has derived its policy accordingly to fit the vision. It is this which has been so conspicuously absent on the Left. In practical terms, much whining and whingeing has taken the place of a thoughtful alternative vision. Bereft of ideas, the

Left has too often taken to the hackneyed catcalls of class struggle and retreated to the comfort and security of familiar institutions presumed untainted by the advances of the Right. In the UK this has meant a Labour party whose sense of the moral high ground enjoined clinging to the apron strings of the nurses and a National Health Service erroneously presumed inviolable even from the present government.

This will not do. 'Socialism' has come to stand for so many things to so many people that the radical cause against capitalism has been thoroughly blunted. The time is ripe for some hard thinking and blunt speaking. The Left can no longer acquiesce in familiar slogans and wearied thoughts. It must examine its own navel with a rigour and detachment long since lost.

A number of efforts have been made in recent years along this path, but I make no apologies for the definite article in my title. Like any theoretician in this domain, I can offer the following only as an account of *the* right answer. The present disarray on the Left can only be resolved by securely fixing in place the conceptual structure of socialism. What follows is my account of how that structure should be fixed. In this introduction I shall propose some of the key ideas and distinctions that are central to the development of my argument.

1. Initial clarifications

It would be tempting to begin with a well-framed definition of socialism and then proceed to justify the components of the position. We might then conclude with an oration to the glory of the position so outlined. But I am not so tempted. It is no exaggeration to say that socialism is in a mess, and it requires more than a slick definition and supporting argument to put things right. I shall offer a working definition in §5, but first we must review our situation and mark some important distinctions.

One thing that marks socialist thought in the UK is the way people instinctively associate socialism with distinctive *methods* rather than distinctive *goals*. So people associate socialism with centralised state planning, or the nationalisation of key industries and increased direct taxation, rather than with a notion of the sort of society socialists wish to bring

about. The reasons for this are, no doubt, largely historical and as much connected with the piecemeal struggle of the British labour movement to gain concessions from Capital as with the intellectual vacuum that too often passes for thought. But whatever the reasons, this concentration on methods not goals is a perversity.

The perversion is twofold. First, the methods that spring so readily to mind are largely discredited and too much linked in the public imagination with the monolithic dullness of a grey paternalistic state apparatus. As Tocqueville noted a long time ago, 'Centralised administration ... perpetuates in the social body a type of administrative drowsiness which the heads of the administration are inclined to call good order and public tranquillity'.¹ Much more serious is the second perversity of the concentration on methods. It is this: It ignores the moral outrage that typically fires socialists.

The ideal socialist, to say nothing of a good many real ones, has a fire in her belly and a moral hymn in her heart. Perhaps not so many can now remember the tune, and the words are long since forgotten, but the centrality of the normative cutting edge to socialism's critique of the status quo cannot be too heavily emphasised. Whatever else is distinctive of socialism it must have, centrally, a morally informed vision of a better life. It must have that cutting edge to its attacks on Capital that comes from commanding the moral high ground. And whether or not we think of this point in terms of the chariots-of-fire or Jerusalem Construction Company version of socialism (from whose work we shall not cease till England's green and pleasant land has been turned over to grand public works for the benefit of all) we must not lose sight of the importance of the moral fire, for there is a very important point here. It is this.

Central to any credible version of socialism must be the idea that there is such a thing as *the good life*. That is to say, there must be a conception of social life, a conception built upon ideas about what things are good and bad irrespective of whether or not many people currently view these things as good or bad. Such a conception tells us something about how we think society *ought* to be, regardless of the way it actually is. And it is

¹ *De la démocratie en Amérique*, vol. 1, 158.

this conception of the good life that informs the moral outrage with which socialists criticise the status quo. For if there is one thing that typifies socialists and terrifies their opponents it is that socialists love to interfere. In contrast to the liberal who tries hard to leave well alone and let people decide for themselves on what makes for a good life, the socialist, on seeing the way market mechanisms distribute goods and favours, cannot resist tinkering with the mechanisms to produce some favoured result. Socialists are drawn increasingly from the professional meddling classes, and this is no accident. I shall argue that it is central to socialist activity and theory that there should be more to the good life than the unrestrained pluralism and individualism of liberal theory. It is because of this that socialists interfere with the way the market works. It is because of the idea of there being something called 'the good life' that socialists have a licence for interference.

Let us not be mistaken about the importance of this point: acceptance of it amounts to a radical departure from much accepted political theory. And although this means that we risk making many enemies and losing a good few friends along the way, I am convinced of the profound importance of this point. Of course, if we are bold enough to admit our role as interfering promoters of the good, we must acknowledge that we are desperately in need of a *model of interference*. The models that spring readily to mind – the busy-bodying do-gooder and the totalitarian despot – are clearly unpalatable. We need to know what model of interference can be legitimised by our notion of the good life. I shall introduce the model shortly and expand it in Chapter 1. But to show that this business about the good life and a model of interference is in deadly earnest, here are two ways of pressing the idea of the importance of the notion of the good for the development of socialism: first by its role in defending a concept of social justice, and second by its role in contrasting socialism with liberalism.

2. The good and social justice

With what right do we say that someone has been wronged when they suffer unemployment and its consequences even though their fate was not the conscious choice of any one agent? This is a common enough scenario in our society.

Decisions are made with no intentional bearing upon the lives of others and yet, through the hidden-hand mechanisms of the market, someone or other eventually suffers as a consequence. Equally pertinent is the way that the complexities of society bring about unintended benefits for individuals. The individual followers of pop music have no intention of making their idol fabulously rich, but the cumulative effect of ticket and record purchases does just that. The entrepreneur has no intention of making this or that worker unemployed with all the consequent financial and emotional hardship that that brings; nevertheless the outcome of her actions may well spell disaster in numerous households. In both cases there is a strong impulse to modify such cumulative outcomes by appeal to a notion of social justice: fabulous riches should be redistributed through the taxation system, a safety net of welfare and restraints should be established to assist the unintended casualties of complex market decisions. But this impulse needs justification. Why are we right to interfere?

Our attitudes to such impulses divide into two fundamentally different approaches to questions about justice, which we might call the *historical* and *end-state* accounts of justice. On the historical approach, justice is a purely deontological concept; that is to say, it is a concept, like that of a *right*, which works solely as a constraint upon the way people act. On this approach, a distribution of goods in society is just if it has been arrived at by processes that conform to the appropriate structural constraints. So, for example, in the case of the pop star's wealth, if all the fans genuinely owned the money with which they bought their concert tickets in the first place, and assuming that they are entitled to do with their possessions as they see fit, then the fact that in purchasing tickets they unwittingly brought about fabulous wealth for one individual is neither here nor there with regard to the justice of the consequent distribution of wealth. Similarly with the case of the worker made unemployed. Providing no agent has acted intentionally to harm the worker, the worker cannot complain that she has been wronged, only that she is the unfortunate recipient of a bad hand dealt by market forces.¹

¹ A well-known recent version of an historical account of justice is Robert Nozick's entitlement theory of justice in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford 1975), which in turn picks up features from a tradition going back to Locke.

These accounts of the examples contrast with those that depend upon an end-state conception of justice. In such a case, justice is not simply a matter of how a particular distribution came about, it is also concerned with the end-state pattern of the distribution. There may well be constraints on how distributions of goods come about, but there is also an element to the concept of justice which is concerned with the resulting pattern of distribution. Any theory which embodies an egalitarian or a redistributive element to its account of justice will be an end-state account of justice.¹ When socialists employ a notion of social justice in criticising the suffering brought about by unemployment or the inequity of massive wealth, they are appealing to an end-state notion of justice. And it is the notion of the good of this end-state that alone can license the socialist interference.

But socialists are faced with a problem here, for we live in a political culture which is predominantly disposed towards historical notions of justice and opposed to there being scope for substantive debate about a concept of the good that might inform a richer, end-state, concept of justice. The contrast here is this: Do we think that the determination of goods should be left wholly to the choice of individuals fixing goods for themselves, or do we think that there is what we might call a *social dimension to the good*? If we think the former, society is no more than the flux of individuals chasing their own ideas of the good and, providing no one deliberately acts to harm another, if someone suffers harm that is no more than an unfortunate side-effect of the complex matrix of individual goods-seekers. And, on this option, the resulting unemployment and massive unevenness of wealth distribution is not an injustice.

In contrast there is the option of saying that there is a social dimension to the good. The good is something over and above what the various individuals in society happen to seek after at any one time, it is something that takes within its compass the way things are for society as a whole and not just for individuals. This is a radical idea. A central problem for

¹ John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard 1972) is the most celebrated recent attempt at such an account.

socialists lies in coming to terms with just how radical this idea is.

The left has for too long been impressed by the agenda of liberalism in terms of which we think of ourselves as isolated moral consciousnesses. On this agenda there is no space for the idea of the good as a collective notion, something about which we need to argue together and construct between us. The agenda allows only for the private individual fancies and goods that flourish within the minimal constraints of theories of rights which, in turn, lay down the ground rules by which seekers after goods avoid collisions in the frantic market place of social life. The demise of the notion of the good as something which transcends individual choice is well measured by the advance in our history of the importance of theories of rights.

Where we have a substantive notion of the good we have less need for a theory of rights to carve out our moral space. In a society in which there exists a substantive notion of the good life it is not necessary to protect individuals with the abstract barriers of rights, for their place in society is marked by their shared grasp of the good. Take a homely, but sharp, example. The notion of family life is often thought to embody certain ideas of the good. The family is, often enough, the seat of our moral life. Being a parent automatically carries certain obligations and ideas of the good – what a good parent is like. But the disruption and fragmentation of our ideas, indeed our very language of the good, has now reached the point where this is no longer so common.

The extent of the collapse of shared ideas of the good can be measured by the increase in the language of rights. As the moral sphere shaped by the good collapses so talk of rights steps in to protect individuals from the ensuing moral vacuum. And at this point in the closing years of the twentieth century, the collapse of the moral life is nearly complete. We now find that it is necessary to invoke the concept of *children's rights*. Being a child no longer guarantees a shared role and conception of the good with one's parent. The moral space in which a young life may find comfort and recognition is no longer automatically provided by a shared good life, it must be protected by the abstract claims of rights against those who now, rather than being cast as partners in a common moral life, are cast as potential adversaries: these people are your