

Is America Possible?

Social Problems from
Conservative, Liberal,
and **Socialist**
Perspectives

SECOND EDITION

Henry Etzkowitz



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Second Edition

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PREFACE

Rather than viewing social reality in the light of a single framework, simultaneously using alternative theories provides a better understanding of society. Since much of social problems analysis has been developed from conservative, liberal, and socialist political theories it is appropriate to use these theories as alternative perspectives from which to view social problems. The original framework for social problems analysis in American sociology came from the liberal political tradition. Later, a conservative perspective was introduced into American sociology. Recently, socialist perspectives have been introduced into social problems analysis.

Observing society after the French Revolution, European intellectual forefathers of sociology such as Alexis de Tocqueville developed perspectives on social change that were antirevolutionary but not unsympathetic to social reform. In a later generation, Max Weber developed his ideas in opposition both to the revolutionary theories of his time as expressed by Karl Marx and to reactionary Prussian nationalists. Similarly, in their openness to social reform, the founders of sociology in America such as Albion Small, Chairman of the Sociology Department at Chicago, developed their ideas as an alternative both to conservative and radical solutions to the social issues of their time.

Sociology, which appeared in the United States as an academic discipline in the late nineteenth century, merged institutional economics with social Christianity, muckraking journalism, and an emerging social welfare profession. The first sociology department at the University of Chicago in the 1890s provided representatives of each of these groups with the opportunity to secure a place in the university. Institutional economics and social welfare provided the new discipline with its initial source of faculty while social Christianity and muckraking journalism provided an external base of support.

From the mid to the late nineteenth century economics lost interest in dealing with the major social issues created by the industrial revolution and the struggle between capital and labor. Most academic economists of that era were conservative social Darwinists who believed in the principles of *laissez faire* and non-intervention in human affairs. They held that unequal social conditions which made some people rich and left most poor, were an expression of immutable and unchangeable natural laws. Institutional economists, by contrast, were younger scholars, often trained in Germany. They conceptualized the social upheavals of the nineteenth century in institutional and social terms and believed they were amenable to planned human intervention and social reform. These scholars wanted to develop research on labor and industrial conditions but had difficulty finding academic positions in the United States. The conservative scholars who controlled American economics departments in the late nineteenth century did not want their discipline to deal with social welfare or philanthropy. When economics renounced these areas the way was opened for the birth of sociology in the United States as an independent academic discipline.

The new discipline of sociology provided arguments and data to oppose exclusionary conservative analyses of issues such as race, immigration, and minorities during the early decades of the twentieth century. Sociologists maintained that outsiders could be incorporated into American society without fundamental social change. These liberal political implications remained relatively hidden until quite recently. The overt political connections of sociology were minimized since the role of the sociologist was defined as a searcher for knowledge. Political issues such as immigration, industrialization, race relations and city life could be studied, but the use of this knowledge was to be left to others. The sociologist's job was to produce a research report. Typically, a social situation was presented in terms of what it meant for the people living in it. The Chicago school of sociology studied street gangs, hoboes, dance halls, ethnic neighborhoods, and more recently, police, drug users and unemployed black men. These sociological studies describe the difficulties their subjects encounter when their conduct differs from accepted social norms. Followers of this tradition rarely examined the top levels of major institutions such as government and big business except in subordinate appendages such as an unemployment office or factory floor. This research tradition, that brought forth a massive outpouring of monographs during the first thirty years of the twentieth century, continues into the present. The implicit political assumption of the Chicago school of sociology was that the major institutional structures and ideals of American society were valid. Reforms were necessary to give immigrants and minorities access to participate in capitalist structures and an opportunity to achieve economic success, but the capitalistic system itself was not challenged.

In the 1930s a conservative model for the interpretation of society was imported into sociology from the natural sciences. *Equilibrium theory* emphasizes the maintenance of the different parts of a society in a balanced relationship to each other. The equilibrium model was first used in the social sciences by Italian economist and social theorist Vilfredo Pareto in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

L. J. Henderson, a Harvard physiologist with an interest in the social sciences, offered a seminar on Pareto in the early 1930s. He introduced the equilibrium

concept of society to several students who later became influential American sociological theorists, among them George Homans and Talcott Parsons. Parsons introduced this framework into sociology as an organizing principle of his paradigmatic work, *The Structure of Social Action*, wherein he reinterpreted the work of Durkheim, Pareto, and Weber to derive a model of society which embodied essential conservative principles of order and stability. Parson's student Robert Merton carried this model of society into the analysis of social problems. Merton's conception of manifest and latent functions became a means by which social behavior that appeared to be deleterious could be shown to be performing socially necessary and useful purposes. A political struggle between the adherents of the liberal and conservative approaches to sociology came to a head in the 1930s in a dispute over the control of its national association, the American Sociological Society. A conservative victory resulted in the establishment of a new journal, the *American Sociological Review*, which would present sociological theory and research from the standpoint of an independent scientific discipline, existing in isolation from direct social concerns and committed to the goal of objectivity in producing research and theory about society. The institutionalization of this approach in the American Sociological Society (later renamed the American Sociological Association to represent symbolically this shift) led to a move by committed liberals to form a separate national society to represent their approach: The Society for the Study of Social Problems (SSSP). This society provided an organizational framework for the liberal paradigm as a legitimate sociological approach, but it remained of secondary status and influence during the 1950s, when conservative sociology was dominant.

This intellectual hegemony of conservatism in sociology was broken when C. Wright Mills in the mid 1950s and others in the early 1960s charged that sociologists had not given sufficient attention to the unequal distribution of power in the United States. Mills called upon sociologists to look at this question and to focus on the relatively small group of power wielders who, he held, ran the country. Younger sociologists, especially those who had become involved in the social movements of the 1960s, heeded this call and raised further questions. The concept of "imperialism" was put forth as necessary to explain the relationship of American society to much of the Third World. This concept and other Marxist concepts, such as class, which had been earlier used by sociology in an eviscerated and weakened form, were now used by radical sociologists with its original connotations of class conflict. Radical sociologists did not always agree on either the means or ends of social change. Nevertheless, they held a common perspective on the types of questions it is important to ask about society. They wanted to investigate such topics as: the nature of the modern state, the composition of elites, the methods of attaining social change.

The breakdown of conservative theory as the dominant paradigm in sociology is related to the breakdown of the political consensus of the larger society that was based on Cold War anticommunism. Proponents of this conservative political consensus believed that America was both the wealthiest country and the most idealistic nation. The free life of the individual was the highest goal in the United States while in the Soviet Union and other communist countries the individual was forced to carry out the will of a government over which he or she had no control. America was viewed as a country in which public opinion

determined public policy, if not immediately, then at least within a reasonable period of time.

For many younger Americans this belief system was shattered by the prolongation of the Vietnam War. Potential inductees into the draft were confronted with a dilemma. The code of post-World War II America did not provide an answer. The young American male's life choices were narrowed to school or a strategic occupation as an alternative to volunteering for the army or accepting the draft. Revision of the draft then narrowed the choices to the army, conscientious objection, or prison. Faced with these often unattractive alternatives, many began to question the truth of the previously taken-for-granted ideology of the freedom of the individual to determine his own life choices in American society. If a young man had to choose between going to school or going to war, was he really free?

Many sociology students entered graduate school in the sixties after participating in the civil rights and antiwar movements. They began to try out Marxist concepts on the social conflicts they had experienced. They formed radical caucuses at national and regional sociology meetings and movements within their graduate departments to give students participation in university decision making. They organized radical student journals, such as *The Human Factor* at Columbia, *Catalyst* at SUNY Buffalo, and the *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* at the University of California, Berkeley.

The impetus that has led many younger American radical sociologists to Marxism has been the search for theoretical guidelines to understand developments in American society which the Vietnam War brought to public awareness. These issues include the concentration of economic power in relatively few hands, the use of political techniques, both covert and overt, by American corporations, the CIA, the State Department, and the military to prolong the war, and foreign aid to maintain American control over many of the underdeveloped Third World countries. Research and analyses of war-related issues published in new journals such as *WIN Magazine* or *Viet Report* and circulated in underground newspapers created in the course of antiwar movement brought basic facts about the nature of the American society to the attention of many students. The inadequacy of "modernization" as an interpretive schema to analyze developments within the Third World and relationships between advanced industrial societies and the Third World motivated a search for a new explanation. This search led to the rediscovery of imperialism as an interpretive schema and of Marxism as an overarching theoretical framework to enable sociological scholars both to understand the world and to try to change it.

The emergence of alternative sociopolitical frameworks in sociology cannot be viewed in isolation from similar developments in the other social sciences. The same process of clarification of disciplinary concepts, by making implicit political perspectives explicit, is also taking place in economics, anthropology, and political science. Often scholars from different disciplines but holding the same political paradigm have more in common than scholars from the same discipline with different politics. For example, a socialist economist and a socialist sociologist are both likely to formulate the relationships between the industrialized and nonindustrialized worlds in terms of the concept of

"imperialism," whereas liberal scholars from each of those disciplines would more likely use the framework of "modernization" theory.

Sociology is emerging from its late 60s and early 70s crisis reformulated along the lines of conservative, liberal, and socialist political theories. The implicit conservative and liberal political perspectives of structural functionalism and symbolic interactionism have been revealed. Socialist perspectives, formerly viewed as non-sociological and unscientific, are emerging within the discipline. Intellectual and political disputes between adherents of differing sociopolitical perspectives now take place within the discipline and all of these divergent intellectual traditions are increasingly viewed as legitimate sociological perspectives.

Is America Possible? makes explicit use of conservative, liberal, and socialist perspectives as a method of social problems analysis. The essential ideas of the three perspectives are presented and each social problem is discussed from all of these viewpoints. The goal is to enable students to define their own intellectual and political standpoint by applying alternative theoretical perspectives to the understanding of social problems.

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INTRODUCTION: POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

We are all political actors. Some of us vote on election day; others do not. Some of us organize or participate in demonstrations; others do not. One person may write a letter to a newspaper to protest against the pollution of a river. Another person may express an opinion to a friend that welfare encourages poor people not to want to work. Yet another person may join in picketing the headquarters of a company that has moved its factories abroad. All of these actions, non-actions, or opinions are expressions of a political stance. Each contains within it a theory of how society should be organized and how it should be changed.

To say either that something should be different from the way it is or that the way things are is satisfactory is to make a value judgment. Value judgments say that something is "good" or "bad" or perhaps important. Everyone who enters into the discipline must face up to the question of the place of value judgments in sociology. Moreover, if there is any one area of sociology that especially demands a consideration of value judgments, it is the sociology of social problems. This is the area that defines the critical issues of where we are and where we are going as a society and that explores alternatives.

The very act of defining some part of social life as problematic necessarily involves taking a value perspective; that is, it says that something is good or bad. Making this judgment is as inevitable in everyday life as it is in the practice of sociology, if one does not totally ignore the world. To admit to such judgments is

not to say that sociologists discard the scientific method in their scholarly work. Rather, each sociologist uses it in examining society, but the goals desired reflect their own perspectives.

Often students come to the study of sociology with the expectation that the discipline will provide them with a single, agreed upon set of answers to the problems of American society, that the scientific method applied to any issue will result in a specific answer indisputable by anyone who accepts the norms of science. Sometimes sociologists recognize in their writings that there is an opposing analysis to the one they have set forth. Other times, sociologists assume that because they have conducted a scientific study only one answer is possible.

I believe that, to the questions people care strongly about, different answers are likely and even inevitable, for they are usually based on different assumptions. Such differing assumptions or approaches to social problems are not random positions. Rather, they are usually consistent approaches—whether explicit or implicit—connected to longstanding political traditions. Instead of trying to submerge our political differences, let us bring them to the forefront and use them as tools of sociological analysis.

Three major frameworks—conservatism, liberalism, and socialism inform the sociology of social problems. Quite different definitions of social problems and proposals for their solution derive from these world views. Conservatives, liberals, and socialists each start from a different conception of what people are basically like. Each sets forth different goals of how society should be organized. These concepts of human nature and social institutions provide the guidelines within which social problems are analyzed.

Every political theory begins with a picture of what people are really like. This conception of human nature tells us what people have in common. It is a statement of their essential characteristics, fundamental motivations, and most desired goals. Human nature, then, is whatever seems to remain constant in human beings despite cultural, social, and psychological differences. Once the fundamentals about the nature of people are established, a political theory, on the basis of its first principles, delineates the proper relation of individuals to society. Conservatives, liberals, and socialists tell us how people live and work in groups and collectivities. Each states the principles by which social institutions operate: their purposes, reasons for existence, and sources of support.

Determining the concepts of human nature and social institutions held by an author can be helpful in defining his or her political perspective. Conservatives, liberals, and socialists hold quite different beliefs about human nature and social institutions. In the following pages we will see how ideas about what people are really like and how they act in groups are at the root of different political principles and programs.

Conservatism

Human Nature

Conservatives believe that people are essentially evil and irrational. They will do harm to each other unless they are restrained. This negative conception of

human nature leads conservatives to conclude that strong social institutions are necessary for people to live together without harming each other.

Only the elite are exempted from this generally pessimistic view of human nature. These are the small numbers of persons who are fit to rule by virtue of their superior nature. Conservatives believe that some people are inherently much better than others. It is these few, identified by birth, training, or social status, who should govern the rest of us. In the United States, a conservative elite is reproduced from a combination of sources including male birth into wealthy families, individual talent, and attendance at socially prestigious preparatory schools and major universities. No single criterion is sufficient to guarantee elite membership, but the more of these statuses that an individual combines in his or her background, the likelier it is.

Social Institutions

The conservative theory of the elite exists alongside and in apparent contradiction with the view of institutions as self-regulating mechanisms. The market is the fundamental institution. In a market goods and services are exchanged, and prices are set in accordance with the laws of supply and demand. The market provides a single standard that all must adhere to. It exists independently of human volition. The operation of the market is viewed as an ideal to which all other social institutions should conform. To ignore the precepts of the market or to tamper with its operation will result in the downfall of the economy.

The essence of conservatism is institutional maintenance. Although social institutions are viewed as an expression of an autonomous moral order, they must still be vigorously defended. For if institutions break down, in the ensuing chaos each of us will lose what we have attained. This fear of the loss that may follow from social change is a powerful argument for keeping things as they are. Institutions should operate in coordination with each other, much as the wheels of a clock mesh with each other to tell time. People must adjust to the requirements of social institutions to insure that they function smoothly. Individual happiness must be subordinated to this end to insure the welfare of all.

If existing institutions are presumed to be valid, then people who disagree with them are, by definition, wrong. Individuals who do not act in accordance with institutional precepts are defined as deviant. Social deviancy is the study of people who are out of phase with what the dominant social institutions define as normal behavior. Deviants include men and women who remain single when marriage is the norm; individuals who imbibe substances that legislatures and courts have held to be illegal; people who choose not to work; individuals who have sex with members of the same sex; people who appropriate the private property of others; individuals who dress in an idiosyncratic fashion; or people who exhibit inappropriate affect (i.e., laugh at a serious occasion) when interacting with others. Although these individuals may feel that their behavior best meets their individual needs, conservatives do not accept the validity of this criterion. For conservatives, acting in accordance with accepted institutional practice is the valid norm of social conduct. People who break social rules should be negatively sanctioned so that they will get back into line or be an example to

others not to follow their mode of behavior. Informal rituals of putting down inappropriate behavior, prisons, and mental hospitals are some of the means used to inhibit the spread of deviancy.

If sanctions fail to halt the spread of a deviant activity, some concessions to it may be necessary to prevent the larger institutional order from being threatened. To save society from fundamental attack, conservatives must occasionally admit some change lest what they consider to be "deviancy" get out of hand and grow into a mass social and political movement. Once generated, such a movement might escalate its goals and demand change not only with respect to particular concerns but of the entire organization of society. To prevent this occurrence, reforms that serve to preserve the existing social structure may be allowed. After change is instituted, that it has taken place is denied as much as possible. Instead, the basic continuity of the institutional structure is emphasized.

Social Problems

According to conservatives, individuals are ultimately responsible for their social condition. If you are poor, it is up to you to find a job to improve your standard of living. In the conservative view, poverty is the result of an individual's lack of success in improving his or her economic condition; it is not the responsibility of society or a result of existing social arrangements. The poor will be taken account of as a group only if they threaten to become too unruly and disrupt existing social institutions by rioting or looting. In that event, some combination of repression by the police and courts and admission into job training programs and lower level corporate employment will be undertaken by conservatives as a collective solution to a social problem.

Contemporary American conservatism views the business corporation as the model for American society. Obedience to authority must be maintained within the corporation so that goods and services will be efficiently produced and distributed. To attain social tranquility within the corporation, one problem to be solved is the discontent of the workers with mechanized labor. It must be resolved according to conservative principles, or the workers will press for socialist solutions, as in Europe, causing interminable social and political conflict. The conservative solution for labor thus alienated is to substitute artificial gratifications for the real satisfactions of meaningful, self-directed work. Some of these suggested substitutes include job security and participation in decisions about ancillary community activities conducted by the corporation (such as recreation programs and cafeterias). Successful leadership in these activities would also facilitate the access of workers to managerial positions, thus coopting leadership among the workers in order to avert potential organized opposition.

A fundamental goal of the corporation as a social institution is the expansion of the economy. The achievement of profits through corporate controlled technological development is assumed as the chief aim of each citizen as well as of the state. Adherence to this principle will give everyone an ever higher standard of living. Every individual and governmental activity may be judged by the criterion of contribution to the production of profit. If everyone shares this basic premise, the good society can be achieved.

From this perspective, the inclusion of ever greater numbers of people in the corporate system is its most certain insurance for future survival. Since social change for conservatives must be both minimal and beneficial to themselves, an expanding technology, a basic source of concern for socialist ecologists, is the sole engine they see as consistent with their view of "progress".

In examining an author's position to determine whether it is conservative, one might ask: (1) Is the author arguing in favor of continuing a social situation as it presently exists? (2) Is the author arguing in terms which call for the maintenance of social order and stability as a higher value than any other goal? (3) Does he or she consider the acquisition of private property a major social goal and interference with that goal—especially by the state—a social evil? Attainment of private property, stability, order, and maintenance of the status quo may be seen as the principle components of most conservative arguments about the nature of the good society and the means of attaining it.

Liberalism

Human Nature

Liberals believe that people are neither all good or all bad. While most people are basically good, even good people have flaws. They will act benevolently toward others much of the time but not necessarily in any and every situation. Conversely, some people who usually cannot be trusted will occasionally do good. Since people are variable in their conduct, rules and institutions should be set up to improve their behavior. But since institutions ultimately consist of people, even courts, schools, and legislatures cannot be totally relied on to insure that people will act properly.

Social Institutions

Social institutions work best when good people are in positions of power. An important liberal goal is to get the best people into positions of power. But since it cannot be counted upon that the best qualified people will always be the ones chosen to run institutions, the power of institutions should also be limited. This may be done by setting one institution to work as a check on another. Thus, even if the right people are not always in power, no single institution can do too much harm if it is properly balanced by other institutions. In the United States Constitution the President, Congress, and Supreme Court balance each other. No single branch of government can go too far in any direction without the possibility of another acting as a check and balance on its power.

This plural structure helps insure that power will be limited. With the division of governmental authority, it is unlikely that any single group could gain control of all areas of government. Different groups and interests have to compromise with each other in order to make policy. The diversity of interests and the necessity of alliances among groups insure that the desires of all groups will be represented in establishment of national policy. No single interest can push the nation too far in any direction. Various groups and interests—such as business,

labor, ethnic, and racial groups—are held to be relatively equal in their access to power, and power is believed to be widely dispersed.

A basic assumption of liberalism is the taken-for-granted existence of a capitalist economic system. This economic system, as well as its allied institutions, is also seen to consist of a number of competing groups. No single economic group is believed to be able to dominate another, although governmental regulation is required to maintain this balance.

Liberals believe that all good ends are the result of “good” means—and the term “good” implies that proper procedures are not violated. A liberal holds to the principle that all ideas must be allowed to be heard. That the individual has inalienable rights, such as freedom of speech, is the heart of contemporary liberal political theory. The exercise of one’s rights in the competition for power takes place in accordance with the established rules of law. In case of an unresolvable disagreement between individuals or groups, recourse may be had to the primary interpreters of these rules, the courts. All sides are expected to accept the validity of the rules as well as the decision, which is handed down from a source assumed by definition to be impartial regarding the dispute at hand.

Social Problems

Liberals view social problems as the result of flaws in institutions or in people. Institutional defects can be remedied in two ways: by replacing the people who are running the institution with persons who will do it better, or by reforming the institution. For example, if a nursing home is discovered to be offering inadequate care to its residents one solution is to replace the people in charge with individuals who will provide adequate care. Liberals do not like a person to hold a position of power for long time. Power tends to corrupt people. A good institutional structure has a procedure to replacing the people in charge on a regular basis.

If an institutional defect cannot be resolved by replacing the people in charge, the next step is to analyze the institution in question and set forth proposals to modify it so that it will be better able to achieve its goals. To continue with our previous example, if new and better qualified administrators are unable to succeed in improving conditions in the nursing home, the next step would be to undertake a study of the nursing home to see if it had adequate staff, procedures, and resources to provide proper care. If any of these areas were found to be inadequate, a recommendation for change would be in order; i.e., to increase the number of staff, enhance the quality of their training, improve the physical facilities, or provide additional activities or therapy for the residents. The proposed changes would tend to involve specific measures that fall within the framework of the existing institutional concept of a nursing home. Liberals tend not to question basic institutional principles but work within their guidelines as much as possible. The goal is to come as close as possible to the institutional ideal. Liberals realize that to achieve ideal conditions in the operation of any institution is probably beyond the grasp of human attainment. The process of social improvement is seen as a constant battle in which small gains are made on a step-by-step basis. Total transformations of social institutions are viewed as

potentially dangerous even if they could succeed. It is far better to work within the existing institutions that we are familiar with than to step off into the unknown.

In liberal theory, conflict can be handled within the limits of the existing structures of society. Although these structures are not believed to be immutable to change, change—in the direction of fulfilling liberal values such as equality of opportunity—is attained at a relatively slow pace. A little at a time is gained through compromises with opponents. Liberals do not hold out for all they want. They take what they can get now—and they work for more. Contemporary liberals believe that social improvement will occur gradually through the exercise of state power on behalf of those who are poor and oppressed.

The role of social science, according to liberal practice, is to provide legitimated information for advances toward liberal political goals. This information may be used to persuade policy makers of the wisdom of implementing a social reform. It may be data which show that the public is ready to accept a social reform. It may be a theoretical framework showing that activities heretofore considered deviant are actually in accord with liberal values if viewed in the proper light.

From the liberal perspective, social problems are not necessarily related to structural conditions in society. Since the definitions of social problems are subjective, and since the subjective definitions vary according to the opinions of different groups, a social problem from this perspective is "what any group defines as problematic." As Howard Becker says:

Consider race relations. Although clearly an area of major social concern, it is not clear what the "problem" is. For the Negro and for many white citizens as well, the problem is how to achieve as rapidly as possible the full participation of the Negro in American society. For other whites the problem is different: the possible loss of social advantages they have long enjoyed at the expense of Negroes. For many politicians and for some social scientists the problem is the tension and violence of a situation in which Negroes demand rights that whites are unwilling to grant. For professionals—social workers and educators, among others—the problem is to undo the harm done by generations of segregation and discrimination so that the Negro will be equipped to take advantage of his rights. This does not exhaust the list: parents worry about preserving the neighborhood school, realtors worry about the effect of open housing laws on their business, and diplomats worry about the effect of our racial crisis on the leaders of the new African and Asian nations.¹

Social problems are what people think they are. Definitions of the same issue depend on the definer's place in the society. According to Becker, there is a natural history of the development of a social problem. The first step occurs when an individual or group sees some situation as problematic. Then the group convinces others so that the issue has public attention. When concern is sufficiently broad, an organization will be formed to do something about advancing a resolution of the problem.

1. Howard Becker, *Social Problems: A Modern Approach* (New York: John Wiley, 1966), p. 6.

Socialism

Human Nature

Socialists believe that people are basically good. They naturally feel concern for fellow human beings. However, the good nature of people is often subverted by existing social institutions that do not fulfill human needs. This positive view of human nature and negative view of existing institutions lead socialists to conclude that institutions must be changed so that human needs may be fulfilled.

Human needs include basic necessities and creative activity. People require food, clothing, and shelter. Human beings also share an innate desire to participate in meaningful work, leisure activities, artistic pursuits, and social interaction. While human needs are the same for all people, the potential means to satisfy them are diverse. The goal of socialism is to create social institutions that allow for the greatest satisfaction of human needs.

Social Institutions

The purpose of social institutions is to meet human needs. Our present day social institutions are the result of a historical progression that continues in motion. The general direction of historical development has been from institutions that benefit elites to institutions that meet the needs of increasing numbers of people. A great improvement in the condition of life for most people has been achieved in the transition from ancient slavery, to medieval feudalism, to modern capitalism. Nevertheless, a considerable gap remains between the level of needs that are satisfied under capitalism and what is possible under socialism.

Capitalism is based on the principle that individuals may own goods that they do not produce themselves. Property ownership allows some people to have the resources to hire other people to work for them. People who work for others in exchange for money wages give up the right to control the products of their work. Two groups of people emerge as a result of this alienation: a class that owns and controls the means of production (i.e., factories, tools, and capital) and a class that offers its labor for sale.

This two class system of owners and workers produces inequalities. Instead of food, clothing, and shelter being equally available to all as a right, access to these necessities of life depends upon one's class position. Ownership and control of the means of production enables the capitalist class to maintain their material existence at the highest level, while workers must get jobs to have adequate food, clothing, and shelter.

Socialists are opposed to a society with private property as the fundamental principle of social organization and a small elite obtaining the greatest benefits. Socialists believe that those who do the work should operate the workplaces and no special class of managers should control the work of others. Socialists hold that utility should be the criterion for production of goods, and distribution should be based on the principle of need. There should be and need be no inherited wealth, since everyone has the right to sufficient material goods and social services to ensure health and well-being. Social structures should

be organized so that people may develop their individual talents while participating in a fair share of the necessary work of society—even that work which no one wishes to undertake by choice.

In general, the socialist critique of American society holds that our institutions are organized so that only a few are fully able to meet their needs. At work almost all Americans are subject to being told how to do their job. Relatively few have the opportunity to set their own goals or change the kind of work they are doing if they are dissatisfied. Still others are unemployed.

Many Americans feel that they have no real say in the decisions that affect their lives. Most Americans feel pressured by a declining personal income and rising expenses. A relatively few Americans, who have inherited wealth or hold high-paying jobs, are not subject to these constraints. These Americans have more choices than the rest of us about how they will live, where they will live, and what they will do with their free time. But even many of these more fortunate Americans are subject to the pressures of narrowly defined jobs. They must do their jobs as they are told or they will lose their prerequisites. Only the relatively few who work as artists, independent professionals, artisans, or craftspersons are able to organize their work life as they see fit. Even fewer of us work cooperatively and share equally in decision making and rewards.

Social Problems

Socialists find the cause of unequal conditions in a social structure in which a few people control most of the resources. Corporations, banks, universities, and almost all institutions in American society, with the exception of a few cooperatives, operate according to capitalist principles, which encourage the accumulation of resources and concentration of decision-making authority in the hands of a few persons.

The socialist approach to social problems reformulates the entire issue by arguing that the “problem” does not exist on the level of either differential subjective definitions of the situation or of social structures in need of modification, but that it is inherent in these structures of capitalist society. According to this formulation, specific “social problems” are surface manifestations of a form of social organization which benefits the powerful few and not the great masses of people.

Specific issues are seen as deriving from inequalities between the classes. For socialists, urban problems cannot be fundamentally resolved by reform of city government or increased federal subsidies to the cities. Inequality in housing or health care may be reduced by these measures. But since access to these resources depends upon one’s position in the class structure, these problems cannot be fundamentally resolved until the domination of one class over another is ended.

What is required to solve this “problem” is a revolution by peaceful or violent means, which will replace capitalism with a qualitatively different form of human society. Until this transformation occurs, social problems will exist as inevitable features of the structural relationships of a capitalist society. Existing social arrangements are to be questioned, and if found wanting should be changed or replaced. Since social institutions were constructed by people they are always open to the possibility of being destroyed by people and reconstructed along different lines. Although people are not totally free to make and carry out