

SOCIALISM

PAST & FUTURE



**MICHAEL
HARRINGTON**

Author of THE OTHER AMERICA

SOCIALISM

PAST and FUTURE

Michael Harrington



Arcade Publishing · New York
Little, Brown and Company

COPYRIGHT © 1989 BY MICHAEL HARRINGTON

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Harrington, Michael, 1928—

Socialism : past and future / by Michael Harrington.
p. cm.

1. Socialism — Forecasting. 2. Socialism — History. 3. Twentieth century — Forecasts. I. Title.

HX44.H35 1989
335'.001'12 — dc20

89-6555
CIP

Published in the United States by
Arcade Publishing, Inc., New York,
a Little, Brown company

Designed by Virginia Evans

*Published simultaneously in Canada by
Little, Brown & Company (Canada) Limited*

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

BOMC offers recordings and compact discs, cassettes and records. For information and catalog write to BOMR, Camp Hill, PA 17012.

**For Willy Brandt and
the Socialist International**

Acknowledgments

This book was begun the day I was told that I had inoperable cancer and a limited time to live. I asked my doctors to keep me alive long enough to complete a summary statement on themes I had thought of throughout an activist life. They did. I therefore want to thank Doctors Nemetallah Amin Ghossein, Juden Reed, and Gerald Fleischner, their assistants Jeannie Nusbaum, Patricia Stacey, Joan Mullen, and Peggy Costigan, and the nurses and staff of Eight South at Einstein Hospital who showed that even chemotherapy can be carried out with humanity.

I have no idea of what is now in store for me, but if these fine people will keep on in their work, perhaps there will be time for another book. Or two. Or three.

Under these trying circumstances, Irving Howe showed himself to be, as I knew he would, a perfect friend. He read the manuscript in both its first and second drafts and was of enormous moral importance to me.

My editor, Dick Seaver, who responded magnificently to my first encounter with cancer, was just as supportive this time. He is a friend and a comrade as well as a colleague.

Socialism: Past and Future

Contents

Acknowledgments · ix

1 · Hypotheses · 1

2 · Socialisms · 28

3 · Authoritarian Collectivisms · 60

4 · The *Realpolitik* of Utopia · 91

5 · The End of Socialism? · 121

6 · The Third Creation of the World · 152

7 · Socialization Revisited · 188

8 · Market and Plan · 218

9 · Visionary Gradualism · 248

Notes · 279

Index · 301



1

Hypotheses

I

SOcialism, I want to propose, is the hope for human freedom and justice under the unprecedented conditions of life that humanity will face in the twenty-first century.

Socialism? The hollow memory of a passionate youth, a youth that took place a hundred years ago? How can a nostalgic irrelevance be the precondition of anything?

Once upon a time, to be precise, on July 14, 1889, when the nascent socialist parties of the world came together in Paris on the centenary of the Bastille, it was reasonable to take socialism seriously. It confidently announced itself as the inheritor of the great bourgeois revolutions, the movement that would redeem a promise of *liberté, égalité et fraternité* that could not possibly be fulfilled within capitalist limits. Parties were being created everywhere in Europe — and in Australia, New Zealand, Latin America, Canada, and the United States. Some of them were so sure of the future that they organized in countries in which the workers had not yet even won the right to vote. The movement may have lacked funds and the least shred of political power, yet it was rich in hope and vision. It felt the winds of history in its sails, and more than a few thoughtful capitalists feared that it was right to do so.

A century later, the democratic-socialist parties of Europe, Latin America, Canada, and the Pacific are a major political force, either in government or in the opposition. Yet none of them

has a precise sense of what socialism means, even if they have often proved to be more humane and efficient trustees of capitalism than the capitalists themselves. The idea of a triumphant working class transforming society from the bottom up has not survived the fragmentation of class structure in every advanced nation. Indeed, “the” working class — homogeneous and united by revolutionary class solidarity — never really existed. And there is now the enormous new social complexity as the world economy and its multinational corporations begin to dictate politics and economics to once sovereign national states. The outcast socialists of a hundred years ago have become men and women of partial power and decent values, but also profoundly uncertain about how to apply their ideals to a world never dreamed of in their philosophy. Werner Sombart, who later became a dedicated foe of socialism, wrote in 1909 that one of the most striking things about the socialist congresses was the way they sang the “Internationale” in unison. “The heads may now and then sway apart,” he wrote, “the hearts after all beat in common.” At the 1969 Congress of the Socialist International in England, the organizers had to telex to London to get the text of their anthem because a good number of delegates no longer knew the words. But then, neither did the organizers.*

At the same time, there are societies resolutely dedicated to the suppression of freedom as a precondition of their continued existence — class societies stratified according to principles of inequality — that proclaim themselves to be socialist. And that is an even more decisive rejection of any necessary link between socialism and freedom and justice than the inability of the Western socialists to conceptualize — not to mention achieve — their goals in an environment light-years removed from July 14, 1889.

And yet it is the central hypothesis of this book that *the political impulse and movement represented by those bewildered, half-exhausted democratic-socialist parties continue to be the major hope for freedom and justice*. Even now there are tentative attempts within those parties to define a new socialism. If there

*The endnotes, which contain the references for quotations and other factual material, cover entire sections of the text and are indicated at the end of each section.

were not, this book would be impossible, the mere imaginings of an isolated individual.

In thus basing my hopes on the existing socialist movements, I am not going back to the absurd dogma that socialism is the wave of the future, the inevitable mode of social organization in the twenty-first century. There is no guarantee that socialism will triumph — or that freedom and justice, even to the limited degree that they have been achieved until now, will survive the next century. All I claim here is that, if they are to survive, the socialist movement will be a critical factor.¹

II

MY SECOND HYPOTHESIS is that *the fate of human freedom and justice depends upon social and economic structures.*

That radical proposition about the future is in some way based on a conservative cliché about the past. More precisely, it relates to an insight that was shared historically by John Locke, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx.* For all the celebrants of the magnificent accomplishments of capitalism — most emphatically including the socialist celebrants, like Marx — understood that there was a connection between social structure, freedom, and justice.

Prior to capitalism, one or another kind of authoritarianism was pervasive. Then capitalism created, not the full reality of freedom — and certainly not of justice — but a space in which men and women could fight for and win democratic rights and even make advances toward justice. In precapitalist societies economic exploitation — the ability of a tiny minority to appropriate all the wealth not needed for the immediate subsistence of those who produced it — was ultimately based on political power. A democratic feudalism was impossible, for it was unthinkable that the

*This is not one more study of Karl Marx or of Marxism. I have already written two volumes showing that the unknown Karl Marx was a revolutionary, *democratic* socialist, and that his methodology has been caricatured to the point of absurdity by so-called Marxists almost as much as by anti-Marxists. But I do not want to go into these matters again. I will, of course, refer often to Marx and his tradition, particularly in the first part of this book. An analysis of socialism that ignored him would be like the proverbial interpretation of Hamlet without the prince.

serfs would freely vote to perform unpaid labor to create an aristocratic standard of living for the lords. They performed that unpaid labor because their religion told them it was their duty and because they would be crushed by armed men if they refused. In Athens, there was, of course, a democracy long before the rise of capitalism, but on the condition that the majority of the people — slaves and women — be excluded from participation. They had to do the work so that free men would have the leisure to be democrats.

Capitalism was a radical new innovation, the greatest achievement of humankind in history, a culture and a civilization as well as an economy. As a rule, the direct producer was no longer coerced to surrender a surplus by soldiers acting in the name of God. Discipline was now economic, not political. One worked at the prevailing wage in obedience to an impersonal market and with the option of starving to death instead. It seemed that everyone — labor, capital, landlords — was paid his or her just, contractual due even though the result was, at first, that a few became quite rich and the overwhelming majority merely survived. But political power no longer *had* to be authoritarian, for it had ceased to be the principal instrument of economic coercion. The worker was “free” in the double sense that he or she was no longer tied to a given manor and had the right to choose between work and death.

A scientific, and then a technological, revolution formed part of this process. Reason itself — with its sovereign disrespect for the traditions that had been so important to precapitalist societies — had become a powerful economic and social force. An objectivity that had been accepted as a given, as an immutable fact from the beginning of historic time, was now to be taken and shaped by human beings. Immanuel Kant announced the “Copernican revolution”: that truth was not dictated to our minds by the world, but imposed upon the world by our minds. In such a universe, Napoleon’s astronomer said, God himself was no longer necessary as a hypothesis.

There were, as a result, new women and men, new kinds of lives. There were now *social* classes, rather than juridical estates and orders in which one was born and died, and one of them, the capitalists, began routinely to engage in unprecedented activities like building private rooms, marrying for love, and making money

as a career. The novel, with its richness of social detail and focus on marriages and money, was the art form that refracted this reality most clearly. And there was the painting of the Flemish Renaissance, in which household goods became the subjects of serene meditations.

There is, however, an important qualifying complexity in this capitalist idyll: the shifts in social structure opened up *possibilities* of freedom and justice, not inevitabilities. After all, the rulers of the system were, more often than not, horrified by the unintended potential of their own magnificent accomplishment. They were terrified that civil rights for the people — or, as the Enlightenment *philosophes* indelicately and habitually referred to them, the rabble, *la canaille*, *der Poebel* — would mean an end of property rights for the elite. Not so incidentally, that oversimplification was shared by the radicals who spoke on behalf of that “rabble.” The young Karl Marx was naively convinced that universal suffrage in a Britain with a proletarian majority would automatically produce socialism. It was, however, the *Realpolitik* of capitalist power that prevailed, not the democratic illusions of revolutionaries like Marx.

In the spring of 1791, during the radical phase of the French Revolution, workers in Paris organized, the carpenters in particular. In response, there was the Chapelier law of June 1791. It forbade the workers to come together “to deliberate on, or take decisions about, their common interests.” The strike did not become legal until 1864, and union organization was not recognized until 1884, almost a century after the Revolution proclaimed its goal of liberty. The rationale was that allowing workers to organize interfered with the freedom of labor in the society. Economic liberalism was, for the upper classes, much more precious than political liberalism, that is, democracy. The latter was to be the work of the “rabble” and, in Europe, of the socialists.

All this was theorized with stunning clarity in the Tenth Federalist Paper of James Madison, in one of the greatest defenses of human manipulation in the history of political theory. In an inverted, pre-Marxist Marxism, Madison argued that social classes based on “the various and unequal distribution of property” gave rise to factions. “The regulation of these various and interfering interests” — creditors, debtors, landlords, manufacturers, financiers — “forms the principal task of modern legisla-

tion." The danger, Madison continued, was that the majority of the people would create their own faction. At that point, "the form of popular government . . . enables it [the majority!] to sacrifice to its ruling passion or interest, both the public goods and the rights of other citizens. To secure the public good, and private rights against the dangers of such a faction, and at the same time to preserve the spirit and the form of popular government, is then the great object to which our inquiries are directed."

This was the source of the famous distinction between a democracy, the direct rule of the people, which threatened property rights, and a republic, "the delegation of the government to a small number of citizens elected by the rest." Later, Madison went on to point out that the separation of powers, a senate not based on democratic representation, indirect elections, and other features of the new constitution all made it possible to forestall the great danger, which was that the majority would not only organize, but act, in its own interest. All in all, Madison's analysis was a clearheaded, candid statement of how the new freedom was to be kept within proper bounds.

The political socialism of the first half of the nineteenth century — and the feminism and abolitionism — might be described as a militant disenchantment with such profoundly bourgeois limitations that were placed on the universal claims of the French and American revolutions. The initial impulse was "the struggle for democracy," the achievement of that political freedom that capitalism had made structurally possible and then had fought tooth and nail. The first great workers' mobilization, British Chartism, was a class-based movement for civil rights, not for bread, even though it peaked in "the hungry forties."

In most democratic countries, universal democratic rights were not won — for workers, women, for blacks in the United States — until well into the twentieth century (in America, 1965!). Established power did everything it could to frustrate the possibilities it had opened up, while the "rabble," often with middle-class allies, became the civilizing force.

My second hypothesis, then, has become slightly more nuanced, focusing on the *possible* political outcomes of economic and social structural change, but it has still not departed from the great consensus of the Western Right and Left on the way in

which capitalism was an essential element in the growth of freedom and justice.

The only unusual aspect of this cliché is that I suggest that it may well apply to the future as well as to the past. That is clearly a critical distinction. Most people who repeat the standard history I have just recited do not ask themselves whether the same kind of relationship between social, economic, and political structure might apply in the midst of the present transition, a moment more radical with regard to the conditions of human life than anything that occurred in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

All of which brings me to my third hypothesis: *the revolution we are now living through is creating a social and political environment that, if it is not subjected to democratic control from below, will subvert the possibilities of freedom and justice that capitalism did so much — if reluctantly — to foster.*

III

IT IS WELL KNOWN that, in a passage that ended with an unfortunate Hegelian flourish, Marx predicted that capitalism would be nothing less than “the negation of the negation,” that, having destroyed feudalism, it would then do away with itself.

Free competition would inexorably turn into monopoly, which would fetter the one great economic excuse for the system’s being: its single-minded expansion of productivity. But the very process that led to this contradictory outcome also had created a proletariat, centralized and organized, which now understood that its tormentors had lost their social usefulness to society. Forced to revolution by the stagnation of what had once been a truly revolutionary system, the workers would sound the death knell of that system in the name of a progressive humanity committed to developing real wealth in freedom and justice rather than monopoly profits. Capitalism, that awesome negation of traditional society, would itself be negated by its own implacable logic and the angry proletariat it had produced.

Unfortunately, the metaphysics and the metaphors of this analysis, which have not exactly stood the test of time, have been immortalized, not the least in the Erfurt Program of the German social democracy in 1891, one of the most influential definitions of

socialism ever made. So most people have not noticed that the profound analysis that preceded the rhetoric has proved true, but not in the way Marx imagined. The capitalist — and antisocial — socialization of the world is indeed subverting its most priceless accomplishment, the creation of the possibility of freedom and justice. And there must be a genuine — and social — socialization if the precious gains of the capitalist era are to be retained and deepened.

There is an unfortunate, but inevitable, ambiguity in posing the issue in these terms. One and the same word, *socialization*, is used to describe counterposed phenomena: the growing centralization and interdependence of capitalist society under the control of an elite; and the possibility of a democratic, bottom-up control by the majority. I had thought of escaping from this confusion by referring to capitalist “collectivization” and contrasting it with socialist “socialization.” I had to abandon that attempt, for collectivization asserts, at a minimum, state control and even ownership, but capitalist socialization is often much more subtle than that. Ronald Reagan, as we will see, used the power of the state for a class-based, discriminatory *reduction* of taxes as a way of subsidizing the tiny minority of the rich. That was clearly a use of social power on behalf of an elite, but it would be hard to call it “collectivization.”*

On the other hand, if one refers to socialism as “collectivization,” that, too, implies that *state* ownership and control is the defining characteristic of the new system. And that, as this book will make clear in innumerable ways, is not the point at all.

So I have reluctantly decided to live with the ambiguity of Marx’s formulation but want to warn the reader at the outset that “socialization” describes two very different ways in which society

*Marx, in the quotation summarized in the text, talks of capitalist property as both “social” [*gesellschaftliche*] and “collective” [*kollektive*]. More often than not, he and Engels wrote of a capitalist “socialization” [*Vergesellschaftung*] that would be turned into its opposite by socialist “socialization.” I am concerned by the use of a single word to refer to two radically different processes, in part because Joseph Stalin rationalized a totalitarian antisocialism in the name of socialism precisely by equating them. Explaining why Marx and Engels invited confusion by their language would lead us too far afield to explore here. Let me simply, and cryptically, say that it probably had something to do with the Hegelian notion of *Aufhebung* in which a revolutionary change does not simply destroy, but also maintains, that which led up to it.

can become more social: under capitalism, there is a trend toward a growing centralization and planning that is eventually global, but it takes place *from the top down*; under socialism, that process is *subjected to democratic control from below by the people and their communities*.

The reality behind these terms is relatively easy to grasp. In precapitalist society, and above all in the late feudalism that preceded the capitalist revolution, one encountered workers who owned or controlled their own means of production. They were artisans with their own tools, peasants with the use of their own plots of land. The resulting mode of production was based upon atomized, isolated property, and consequently was characterized by low levels of productivity. Capitalism begins, Marx argues, with the "expropriation . . . of that private property which is based upon the labor of the individual." The peasants are driven from their land, the artisans "deskilled" by the process that leads to the capitalist enterprise.

In the place of that individualistic form of private property, capitalism, Marx holds, creates a "social, collective property." The new system, which regularly defended its legitimacy on the grounds that the laborer deserved title to the property he or she transformed through hard work, began precisely by expropriating such property and develops as a dynamic contradiction in terms, as a *private collectivism*.

The new order began not with technological change — the industrial revolution occurred long after capitalism was already in motion — but with the social organization of work. On the basis of the old tools and methods, ten artisans laboring under the direction of a single capitalist were much more productive than if they worked alone. That was, Marx rightly commented, "the secret of social labor," the foundation of capitalism's unprecedented output of wealth and, after a century or so of class struggle, even of higher living standards for many of the people. Initially it involved only the "formal" subjugation of the producers to the rule of capital, and the substance of the work process did not change.

That happened as capitalist socialization proceeded apace. The artisans in small shops gave way to less skilled workers who tended the machines of large factories; the medium-sized capitalists took over their small competitors and in turn were taken over by the larger capitalist. Science, the social form of knowl-

edge, achieved prodigies as it was utilized in the new system of manufacture. For the first time in human history, the world was created as a political and economic unity. Life became more centralized, more organized, more interconnected in every aspect; it was socialized. By the end of the nineteenth century, *laissez-faire* — where entrepreneurs obeyed the “invisible hand” of the market — turned into corporate capitalism, where the “visible hand” of professional executives sought, with assistance from the government, to dictate to markets rather than to follow them.

This capitalist socialization process was in the main antisocial. The costs were imposed on the most vulnerable individuals and communities; the benefits, particularly before the rise of the labor and socialist movements, were monopolized by a tiny minority. Traditional society was destroyed; peasants and artisans were uprooted; and the evil, fetid cities depicted by Dickens and Hugo came into being. There were alcoholism — gin was the first hard liquor for the masses, and it dulled the agony of the rise of British capitalism — wife and child abuse, and new kinds of plagues and epidemics that sometimes threatened a biological crisis of the entire society. For the first time in human history, there was a bewildering poverty, the product of growth rather than scarcity, of a perverse abundance rather than of famine.

And competition, just as Marx predicted, did lead to monopoly, particularly in the quarter of a century or so prior to World War I. By 1914, free enterprise, an argument pretending to be a definition, had largely lost its real content. A once innovative, decentralized system that more or less heeded the signals of supply and demand turned into its opposite. Had there not been countervailing political and economic movements, the system might well have “negated itself,” as Marx had suggested. But the classes did not polarize as they were supposed to, the middle did not disappear, even if it became subject to the power of the monopolies. Moreover, the socialist movements falsified their own worst predictions. They imposed a minimum of social responsibility upon a system that, left to its own devices, would have become increasingly powerful, antisocial, and centralized.

But even with those countertendencies, there is a red thread running through the social, economic, and political history of well over a century. No matter who was in power, Left or Right, or