



Gavin Kitching

RETHINKING SOCIALISM

A THEORY FOR A BETTER PRACTICE

Rethinking Socialism

(A THEORY FOR A
BETTER PRACTICE)

Gavin Kitching

METHUEN

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published in 1983 by
Methuen & Co. Ltd
11 New Fetter Lane,
London EC4P 4EE
Published in the USA by
Methuen & Co.
in association with Methuen, Inc.
733 Third Avenue,
New York, NY 10017

© 1983 Gavin Kitching

Printed in Great Britain by
Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press) Ltd
Bungay, Suffolk

All rights reserved. No part of this
book may be reprinted or
reproduced or utilized in any form
or by any electronic, mechanical
or other means, now known or
hereafter invented, including
photocopying and recording, or in
any information storage or
retrieval system, without permission
in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in
Publication Data

Kitching, Gavin
Rethinking socialism.

1. Socialism

I. Title

335 HX73

ISBN 0-416-35840-3

Library of Congress Cataloging
in Publication Data

Kitching, G. N.
Rethinking socialism.

1. Socialism—Great Britain.

2. Socialism. I. Title.

HX244.K56 1983 335'.1 83-12104
ISBN 0-416-35840-3 (pbk.)

Foreword

The General Election occurred as this book was going to press. Late in time, but early enough that I might, had I wished, have altered certain sections of the manuscript (particularly perhaps the beginning of the final chapter) to take account of this further débâcle for the Left. I have decided not to do so. I think it better that the book remain in its original form, partly because in the immediate aftermath of such a disaster it is easy, in depression and frustration, to go 'over the top' in one's own judgements and generalizations. Saturday, June 11th 1983 is still too soon for the dust to have settled and for an in-depth analysis of the results to have been undertaken.

More importantly, however, I have chosen to leave the book as it is because I hope that its political force may be greater if it is unambiguously clear that it was finished three months before the General Election was even announced, and indeed that the first draft was completed by February 1982. Not that I would wish to claim much credit for whatever predictive accuracy it may possess. That the next General Election would result in a Tory

victory was obvious to anybody with what my father would have termed 'an ounce of political nous'. I also think that the extent of that victory was actually greater than can be accounted for by the factors discussed in this book. Quite apart from the 'Falklands factor', it must also be said that the Labour Party fought an electoral campaign which it would be flattering to call inept. But it did so because its leadership and its membership remain fundamentally divided, and on one side of that divide – and currently predominant – is the Left of the Labour Party whose weak-minded utopianism is analysed in these pages. Thus I do think that the kind of Left politics that I discuss in this book, and more importantly the fundamental long-term social changes that have both produced a constituency base for such a politics and rendered its chances of electoral success effectively nil, are at the root of the awful situation facing the Labour Party. Until the party develops a politics that truly faces up to the complexities of a Britain basically transformed by 25 years of sustained capitalist boom, it will, in my view, be doomed to continued decline and marginalization. And yet those changes could be harnessed to the support of a new type of socialist politics. I outline in this book some elements which I think such a politics will have to contain. Much is missing, much needs to be clarified, qualified and developed, but I submit that it at least represents a start.

There is more I could add, but I will not. Instead I will express just one hope. I hope that the Left in the Labour Party will not respond to this perfectly foreseeable and avoidable electoral disaster with any more nonsense about the nasty media, or how the Left case was somehow 'not got across'. For if one thing is obvious, even 48 hours after the election, it is that had the message been 'got across' – plainly, fairly and in all its implications – the defeat would have been even greater. I had the somewhat rare experience of canvassing in a southern constituency which Labour managed to win, and it was very clear that even those who did vote Labour did so despite, rather than because of, the policies in its manifesto. It is quite likely that their

x / Rethinking Socialism

loyalty will not stand even one further test if those policies are not changed.

I said I hoped for a new realism on the Left. Judging from remarks attributed to Mr Livingstone and Mr Mullin in today's papers, that hope is to be disappointed. Truly there is none so blind as he who will not see.

Preface

This book was written in anger. I have become convinced that most left-wing people in this country (counting as left-wing all those people from the Bennite wing of the Labour Party leftwards) are wasting their time. They are wasting their time, politically, because a large part of their views and assumptions about the world are totally at odds with those of the bulk of the people whom they are trying to persuade. They are also wasting their time because those views and beliefs, and the 'ghetto' situation in which most socialists in this country live, lead them to behave in ways which by alienating even potentially sympathetic people are self-defeating. The net result of all this is that 'socialism' as a concept and as a possible and desirable alternative to the kind of society in which we now live is fast losing all credibility. Already, in the wake of the SDP there is a determined attempt to replace socialism by 'social democracy' as the only legitimate form of Left politics in Britain. Soon, socialism, like communism, may be relegated to the status of a political dirty word.

In this situation I want to do two things. I want firstly to explain as clearly as possible to socialists in Britain why I think they are wasting their time. Secondly, I want to suggest not only to them but also to a much wider audience what I think a more practically viable socialist strategy for Britain might be. However, these two tasks do not fit easily together in one short book. The first requires me to deal with some issues in economic and political theory which will be familiar to most people acquainted with socialist ideas and the history of socialist thought, but which may not be so readily comprehensible to others. The second requires that to try and reach as wide an audience as possible, I must keep exotic vocabulary and socialist 'in-group' references to a minimum. Moreover, since I hope the second part of my argument (the suggestions for an alternative) follows logically from the first (an analysis of the shortcomings in current socialist theory and practice), then the whole thing, including the theoretical critique, must be comprehensible to as wide an audience as possible.

Given these aims, and because I do not conceive this book as addressed primarily to Left intellectuals, I have opted for what I hope is a clear, plain and unjargonized prose, even when I have felt that some subtlety of meaning or nuance has been lost in doing so. Secondly, I have opted to dispense entirely with the academic references which books like this are usually full of. Where I am directly indebted to another person's work for a quotation or for a table of statistics I have included a reference, but elsewhere I have risked making assertions and constructing arguments without footnotes to cover my back. This is partly because this book owes as much to personal experience as to academic reading, but also because I think that the intellectual Left's current style of writing and speaking is part of its problem, not part of the solution. Therefore, though what appears below owes much to the influence of Antonio Gramsci, the later work of Nicos Poulantzas, Trevor Pateman, Sheila Rowbotham, Barrington Moore, Gwyn Williams, Isaac Deutscher, Edward Thompson, Leszak Kolakowski, Bill Warren, and, as they say,

'many, many more', this is the first and in many cases the only time their names will appear in this book.

I have, however, made one compromise in this cult of plainness and in avoiding the theoretically difficult or exotic. In Chapter 3 I briefly review some ideas from Edward Thompson's book *The Poverty of Theory* as a prelude to a discussion and criticism of what I call the 'romantic anti-capitalism' prevalent in socialist circles in Britain, especially on the Left of the Labour Party. In the course of the chapter a number of rather more abstruse theoretical and philosophical issues (concerning Marx's understanding of society and history) are referred to. They are not discussed in depth since they are not strictly necessary to the essentially political purposes of the chapter. However, any reader who *is* interested in following this debate further can do so in the appendix to this book, a lengthy essay on politics, economics and intellectuals. However, it is an appendix precisely because it is an optional extra. It is by no means essential to following the central argument of the book.

I also have some debts to acknowledge. 'Romantic', or as he would call it 'radical', anti-capitalism is a concept which I acquired from Michael Cowen, though I cannot say whether he would approve of the use to which it is put here. To Anthea Thomas I owe long overdue thanks for typing yet another manuscript so promptly and well, and to Nancy Marten I am deeply indebted for efforts, far beyond the call of duty, as my editor. Finally, my thanks to Bernard Crick for his warm support and propaganda efforts on my behalf and to David Rosenberg for shoring up the confidence of a writer venturing outside his allotted academic 'field' for the first time.

Contents

Foreword	viii
Preface	xi
Introduction	I
1 / Socialism and the working class	II
2 / Socialism and underdevelopment	48
3 / Romantic anti-capitalism	64
4 / Feminism: potential and actuality	78
5 / Pre-emptive unionism: a possible way forward for socialism in Britain	101
Appendix / Politics, economics and intellectuals	141

Introduction

This book aims to reinstate an evolutionary and gradualist perspective at the centre of socialist politics and thought about socialism. My central thesis is that the construction of socialist societies and a socialist world will take a very long time (probably centuries) and that an essential prerequisite of such a world coming into being is a high degree of material prosperity and a citizenry of considerable skill, knowledge and intellectual sophistication. I also argue that because the development of capitalist societies (societies in which the means of production and distribution are private property owned and controlled by a small minority) both creates a generalized (though highly unequal) material prosperity and leads to the emergence and expansion of an ever more sophisticated working class, it provides conditions which may be conducive to socialist construction in the long term. However, the development of such conditions is uneven and only part of a highly contradictory process. There is nothing inevitable about the emergence of socialism from advanced capitalism and the matter will be determined by social and

political struggle (conscious human activity) whose outcome is always (in the present and future) an open question. The word 'struggle' here is not used metaphorically. I have in mind continuous social conflict which may at times be violent, especially when crucial issues of power are being decided. However, such dramatic moments may alternate with long periods when conflict is much more muted and constitutional, though none the less real for that. Thus my gradualist and evolutionary perspective is not a simple advocacy of incremental social reform, though there may be periods of such reform. It is rather the rejection of any 'cataclysmic' notion of the process of socialist revolution, such that the coming of socialism out of advanced capitalism will be datable to some hour, day or year. In fact, I think it quite likely that if Britain or any other advanced capitalist country reaches a state which many radicals in the 1980s would regard as 'the achievement of socialism', debate and struggle will long ago have shifted to other terrain with other concepts and 'socialism v. capitalism' will no longer be the issue. An impatient world, then as now, may leave it to historians looking back to announce that some process of 'revolutionary' change has been completed since those far off days of the late twentieth century.

Thus I reject a cataclysmic, 'barricades' conception of socialist revolution against advanced capitalism and adopt a gradualist and evolutionary (but not reformist) concept of socialist construction. I also believe that a necessary but not sufficient condition of the creation of socialism is a materially prosperous society. And I believe that socialism is impossible to construct in materially poor and deprived societies. Or rather, I believe that 'socialism in backward and underdeveloped countries has a powerful tendency to become a backward and underdeveloped socialism'.*

Such a position need not and does not involve a lack of

* Paul Baran, *The Political Economy of Growth*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1957, p. 9.

understanding of and sympathy for socialist regimes in poor countries, and certainly there is little point in a dogmatic denial of the right of these societies to call themselves socialist. In so far as they have abolished private property in the means of production, distribution and exchange they *are* socialist. They are *not*, however, *socialist democracies*, and since I hold that recognizably democratic political and constitutional forms are an integral part of socialism, then I regard the socialism of these states as a poor and stunted thing, a 'backward and under-developed socialism' in Baran's phrase.

I hold that these societies are not socialist democracies because (a) many of them are poor and poverty has certain social and cultural consequences which mean that there is little or no effective popular support for democratic forms, and (b) they build socialist economic institutions primarily in order to commence or speed up the process of industrialization and economic growth. Such a process is, I believe, incompatible with meaningful democracy, because it is so unpleasant for the majority of the population in the societies affected by it that if such people had any genuine control over political and economic power they would use it to prevent such a process occurring. Since certain élites in these countries have an interest in this process succeeding and believe that its success is in the interests of the long-term welfare of their people, they will not allow this popular will open or effective expression.

Thus, I am committed to a two-sided conception that (1) socialist *democracy* is incompatible with poverty and primitive accumulation, and (2) such democracy is more compatible with, and feasible in, materially prosperous societies. To repeat, however: to assert (2) is not to assert that socialist democracy *will* emerge in materially prosperous societies, only that the opportunities for such emergence are greater than in poor societies.

This conception also implies that as socialist dictatorships succeed in becoming more materially prosperous, the possibility of their conversion into genuinely democratic socialist societies increases. I think that recent events in Poland and eastern Europe

show this to be true. However, once again I must stress that there is nothing inevitable about this process. The conversion of a socialist dictatorship into a socialist democracy must be struggled for and that struggle may be long and bitter. However, because industrialization and economic growth under socialist dictatorships create material demands and expectations which they cannot meet and (more importantly) create a sophisticated and informed working class able and willing to assert its own power, socialist dictatorships may be seen, historically, as generating the conditions for their own demise.

However, in this book I do not deal, other than peripherally, with the struggle for democratic rights in Russia and eastern Europe or with problems of socialist construction in the Third World. Rather, I am concerned with the second part of my two-sided conception: that advanced capitalist societies provide opportunities for the construction of socialist democracy. I concentrate on this because it is directly relevant to the current political situation in Britain and because most socialists today believe the contrary. They believe it is obvious that with every capitalist boom in the west these societies have moved *further and further away* from socialism and are irredeemably lost in a depoliticizing materialism and reformism. I will argue against this position in all the chapters which follow, and will suggest that the situation is more hopeful than this. It may become even more hopeful, I argue, if capitalism can overcome its current crisis and re-establish long boom conditions again. I also suggest a strategy for use by the Left in Britain which may help to alleviate the capitalist crisis here *and* generate substantial gains for the working class.

However, to see the real opportunities for socialist advance brought by the further development of capitalism in the west, it is necessary to have a rather different conception of socialism, particularly of socialist democracy, than that to which most socialists in Britain are currently committed and to have a rather different conception of the working class, especially of its 'vanguard', than that which is generally held. I argue in fact for radical changes in socialist theory and practice in order to seize

the opportunities that exist for socialist construction in Britain and elsewhere in the west. The first chapter sets out what those changes should be in very general terms and defends them with reference to a conception of socialism which I believe would have found favour with Marx, though it is continually negated in theory and practice by many contemporary Marxists. The second, third and fourth chapters deepen this general critique with reference to (1) the problems of socialism in poor countries and their implications for socialism in general; (2) romantic anti-capitalism which I believe is very powerful on the Left in Britain; and (3) the theory and practice of socialist feminism. The fifth and final chapter derives from the principles set out in the previous four a transitional programme for socialism in Britain in response to the current economic crisis.

One further introductory remark is in order. Running all through this book is a belief that for socialists, and indeed for human beings in general, hope for a better and more democratic future is no mere 'optimism of the will' battling valiantly with a 'pessimism of the intellect' to which it should, rationally, demur. I am struck again and again in much contemporary thought, self-advertised as 'Marxist', how Marx's name is continually invoked in support of a cataclysmic revolutionism, whose justification is to save the world from the doom to which it is otherwise destined, ecologically, demographically, or through nuclear holocaust.*

* A note is necessary here in order to avoid misunderstanding. These remarks should not be taken to mean that I think these dangers to our species to be imaginary. On the contrary, I am a member of CND because I take the last danger very seriously indeed, and in fact as a lot more likely to produce the end of the human race – at least at the moment – than either ecological problems or population growth. The point, however, is that I do not think that the coming of national 'socialisms' will, in themselves, diminish the danger of nuclear war (and may, in fact, depending upon the precise circumstances of their creation, increase it). And if we have to wait for *international* socialism before nuclear disarmament or effective measures to check pollution of the seas (for example) can be contemplated, then the prospects for the human race look gloomy indeed. It is because I believe that the arguments for unilateral nuclear disarmament both can and must be separated from any and all arguments for socialism that I support CND being what it is, a broadly-based popular campaign drawing on people who are not, and do not wish to be, socialists in any form.

But Marx was, in the end, a Victorian. For very good reasons stemming from the industrial transformation of Europe which he witnessed in his own lifetime, he believed in both the possibility and the actuality of progress in human society. Indeed, his primary objection to capitalism was that whilst potentially it held out for the first time the prospect of a genuinely human life for the majority of mankind, its structure and internal dynamics meant that that potential was constantly frustrated. The whole aim of the socialist transformation of capitalism was thus to turn potentiality into actuality. Where Marx and Engels diverged from so many of their contemporaries was *not* therefore in a rejection of the concept of progress in history but in their understanding of the nature of that progress. For them, progress was a highly discontinuous and contradictory process in which, in all class societies, the very processes building 'the productive forces' were at the same time processes of class exploitation and oppression. Engels' famous remark about progress – 'History is the cruellest of all Goddesses. She drives her chariot through heaps of the slain' – has been seen as the apogee of 'historical determinism' and drove Karl Popper* apopleptic. But it was not a prospective defence of Stalin's labour camps or even a 'meta-historical' judgement held to be true eternally for all times and places. It was simply colourful presentation of what Engels took to be a broad empirical generalization about the course of European history up to and including the nineteenth century. The whole aim of socialist transformation for Marx and Engels was to *end* that historical situation by substituting for the exploitative and bloody progress of class society a consciously controlled and planned progress in which 'the free development of each' was to be the condition of 'the free development of all'. A lot easier said than done as we have subsequently learnt, and as all of what follows will stress. But for Marx and Engels it was both possible and necessary because the very development of capitalism would

* Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 2, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952.

both reveal the necessity for such a transformation and, to a degree, provide the means and conditions for its accomplishment. This being said, however, human beings and particularly the working class (which for Marx and Engels meant the vast majority of human beings living under capitalism) still had to use those means and conditions to actively *make* that transformation. There could be no guarantee that it would happen, but Marx and Engels were cautiously optimistic that it would, primarily because each further development of capitalism revealed its essential irrationality more and more clearly, and they believed that rational human beings could not coexist indefinitely with irrational social systems. This belief was essentially a matter of faith, resting as it does ultimately on a view of human beings as essentially rational creatures (indeed distinguished from other creatures primarily by their rationality). It is a faith which I share, and sharing it I share the cautious optimism which it generates.

Their optimism was cautious, however, because Marx and Engels also believed that the bearers of this rationality were real human beings living and acting in particular societies at particular times. It was, therefore, axiomatic for them that this rationality could be, and most frequently was, put to sectional uses, to the pursuit of particular material and ideal goals that frequently involved the exploitation, neglect and repression of other human beings. The exploited, consequently, were forced to use their rationality both as a means of survival and as a means of resistance. Moreover, for any particular group of human beings, rational activity always occurred in a 'given' (inherited from previous generations) set of material and institutional conditions, and was bounded by those conditions whilst at the same time reinforcing them and from time to time changing them. Thus it was that actions of a minority (a ruling class) which might at one historical period be exploitative of the majority, or at least of large sections of the population, might yet issue in material results from which subsequent generations (including the descendants of the previously exploited) could benefit. Thus for Marx and Engels, progress in and through all class societies had