

# Robert L. Heilbroner

## What Is Socialism?

*Following this article are comments by Lewis Coser, Bogdan Denitch, Michael Harrington, and Michael Walzer, to which Robert Heilbroner in turn replies.—EDS.*

**B**eyond the welfare state lies the *terra incognita* we call socialism. It lies there more by assumption than by reconnaissance, for no one has yet observed this socialism in reality: perhaps it will turn out to be a New Atlantis, not a New World. But we assume that socialism lies “beyond” the welfare state because what we generally mean by Western socialism is a set of institutions and cultural attitudes, of social structures and lifeways, that is qualitatively different from those we find under the prevailing state of affairs. Socialism, as most of us think about it, is not just an improved welfare state. It is another kind of society.

What kind? That is a very awkward as well as difficult question, which most socialists, especially Marxists, have been reluctant to examine. When looking at past or present, Marxists like to insist on the necessity of emphasizing the “socioeconomic formations” underlying each separate chapter of history. In so doing, they force an observer to pay special attention to the interaction of social, political, and economic dynamics characteristic of each epoch. But when socialism is mentioned, this tough-minded approach tends to be abandoned, even denigrated as “counterrevolutionary.” Socialism then becomes little more than a compass setting, an imagined landfall over the horizon, and no effort is made to discuss even the most basic

characteristics that we would expect to be associated with a new chapter of human history.

This failure of nerve—for that is what I think it is—carries serious consequences. It enables us to use the word “socialism” in a way that is purely talismanic and devoid of any operational significance. Worse, it enables us to evade questions and dilemmas that are posed by the analysis of socialism as a chapter of history that lies beyond the welfare state. These questions present painful, even agonizing, choices to those socialists who are devoted to political rights and humanistic culture as we know them in the West. That, however, is a matter for later consideration. For we cannot discuss the structure of the culture of socialism until we have reached agreement on the essential elements of the society that it is to displace. This leads us, as the first step in our argument, to consider the nature of the welfare state.

**A**t first blush that seems an unmanageably complex task. There is not one welfare state but many welfare states. The misery of a South Bronx drug “rehabilitation” center, the crude measures of American anticyclical fiscal policy are parts of the welfare apparatus. So are the humane open penal institutions and sophisticated employment policies of Sweden.

Nonetheless, I believe we can discern a common element that allows us to place all these varied institutions under a single rubric. This common element lies in the relation of the welfare apparatus to its underlying socioeconomic formation, which is of course capitalism. Welfare institutions, I think all will concur, arise mainly to cope with the difficulties and damages that are brought about by the workings of a capitalist system. The welfare state, in a word, is a kind of apotheosis of capitalism—the form that capitalism takes in seeking its own salvation.

Whether or not capitalism will find its salvation, or whether it could survive its salvation, are questions we will disregard here. For if we are to contrast socialism as a socioeconomic formation with that of the capitalist welfare state, we must also agree on the difficulties and damages of capitalism to which welfarism addresses itself. And here again, I think we can clearly identify the sets of central problems.

They are two. The first are the difficulties that emerge from the “anarchic” nature of capitalism. Anarchy does not mean an absence of any logic or order in capitalism—there is the famed, and indeed remarkable, “mechanism” of the market. The difficulty, rather, is that the logic and order of capitalism solves some kinds of problems only by imposing others. The market resolves the problem of “efficiency,” for example, but it creates such problems as instability, unemployment, maldistribution, and social neglect of various kinds.

The anarchy of the market is, of course, a direct object of welfare redress. Fiscal and monetary policy, urban renewal, unemployment compensation, social security, antipollution controls, industrial regulation and a long list of similar measures are typical welfare measures that address themselves to the repair, containment, or suppression of the anarchic ills of capitalism. If the remedies are often unsuccessful, the reason is that the anarchic malfunctions reflect the working-out of still deeper-lying core elements in the socioeconomic makeup of capitalism—above all, the direction of productive activity by

privately owned aggregates of capital. This is a fundamental aspect of capitalism—indeed, its vital center—to which welfare reforms do not penetrate, or which they abridge only slightly. That is why welfarism is a development *within* capitalism and not beyond it, and it is why socialism must hesitate before it declares that it can gain its objectives within the boundaries of the welfare state.

There is also a second set of problems with which welfare institutions deal. These problems have to do with the culture of capitalism—its bourgeois “superstructure”—rather than its operational stresses and strains. Here we find such symptoms as the anomic quality of life, the much-discussed malaise and alienation of modern society, the degradations associated with commercialism, the decay of the communal spirit, etc. To alleviate or offset these ailments we find a second array of welfare measures that aim at restoring social morale, or at providing a sense of communality. The elaborate edifice of education is partly supported for this purpose. Services are provided to the sick or the aged, not only for economic but for “social” reasons. Indeed, the very presence of a government that declares its interest in the protection of the environment, in “law and order,” and in the public weal, fills the need for an explicitly moral social concern to which the private sphere makes no contribution. The welfare state thus seeks to provide through the public sector a sense of communality that is absent from the attitudes normally engendered by a bourgeois culture.

To be sure, these attitudes of a bourgeois culture are themselves symptoms, not root elements. Just as the anarchic aspect of capitalism expresses deeper-lying problems, so the familiar social ailments of modern capitalism also express more fundamental attributes of the system—in particular, the profoundly individualistic ideology and morality of a system built on a universalized competitive striving for wealth. And just as the welfare state seeks to remedy the problems of the market while bypassing its core institutions, so welfare capitalism tries to undo the excesses of its culture while leaving

untouched the acquisitive, privatized ethos that is inseparable from its economic structure.

This is not the place to discuss the limited efficacy of welfare reforms, either in the sphere of culture or economics. Rather, what I wish to emphasize is that we discover the problems of economic anarchy and social alienation (to use catchwords) in all capitalist societies, from the crudest to the most refined. Whether we investigate West Germany or Norway, England or the United States, we see economic disorders stemming from the mechanism of the market, and disaffection, erosion of social morale, and a troublesome radicalism among students, arising from the cultural milieu.

My aloof tone may suggest a scornful denigration of the efforts of the welfare state to offset these problems. Of course, once one sees the failure of welfare measures to grapple with the deepest roots of the malfunctions to which they are addressed, some critical stance is inescapable. Yet I am far from dismissing the achievements of the welfare state as hypocritical or insignificant. Indeed, it may well be that the welfare state at its most advanced—as we find it in the Scandinavian nations or in certain policies of the Netherlands or Austria, for example—is the best we can do today to achieve humanist goals without jeopardizing key political and social rights. That, too, is a question to which we will return. Here I wish only to hammer home the point that the welfare state, adequate or not, must be considered as a form of capitalism—a conclusion that impels us to ask again exactly what we mean by socialism.

**W**hat *do* we mean by socialism? Historical imaginations are notoriously poor. The response I shall hazard may be ludicrously wide of the mark from some future vantage point. Nonetheless one must do what one can, and my imagination yields only one answer to the question. *If socialism is to be a new socioeconomic formation—I must hammer home this premise—then it must depend for its economic direction on some form of*

*planning, and for its culture on some form of commitment to the idea of a morally conscious collectivity.* These two elements seem to me to be the only alternatives to the anarchic character and alienated culture of welfare capitalism.

Let us begin with the economic issue. There are iron necessities that govern the economic activities of all societies. Provision must be made to satisfy needs for current consumption and to replace the worn-out capital of any period. Moreover a society facing technological change within, or environmental change without, will have to alter its patterns of inputs and outputs in order to maintain a steady state of final consumption and capital replacement. And last, a society seeking to increase its wealth must refrain from consuming, and must invest the resources and labor that have been saved.

These essential tasks require the coordination of activity, often on a vast scale. Speaking in stylized fashion, there are only three ways in which this can be done. Societies can trust to the guiding hand of tradition for the maintenance of a fixed configuration of activities; this is the “system” of tradition by which primitive societies secure their continuance. Tradition will not, however, arrange things when the environment changes, or when new technologies enter or when growth is sought (the two latter cases unlikely in a tradition-bound milieu). The coordinating mechanism then becomes “command”—the conscious direction of social energies by some individual or institution empowered to allocate effort, determine levels of consumption, etc. Finally, the integrating and directing economic task can also be performed by the market. The market is actually a form of highly decentralized command, in which each person is trained by culture and impelled by self-interest (or at the extreme, self-preservation) to “obey” the stimuli of the marketplace.

Tradition is the operative system for nondynamic cultures; and it might in the future become the operative system for socialism. It conjures up the image of a socialist economy as a congeries of kibbutzim,

each reducing to a minimum the “cash nexus” within its boundaries, and each affiliated in the larger economy by a web of long-established exchange relationships that would involve a minimum of either market dealings or command directives. Life would then follow a steady inertial course, presumably with a minimum of self-generated or externally imposed change.

However attractive such a vision, at today’s juncture of history it is futile—worse, dangerous—to imagine that tradition could solve the problems of material reproduction and adaptation. The problem of change, stemming both from the continuous pressure of science and technology and from the tightening constraints of the environment, are aspects of our era that will not disappear with the advent of socialism. Society will have to alter its structure of production continuously whether or not it seeks growth. Moreover, let us not forget that the stated purpose of socialism is to change the patterns of present-day income distribution and employment. Tradition cannot accomplish that.

Could the market system, under suitable guidance, accomplish these ends? Here the problems are two-fold. The first is whether the conventional means of guidance for a market system would be sufficient to bring about the desired or needed changes. Would taxes, subsidies, regulations, and the like effectively alter income distribution, or would individuals following their acquisitive impulses (how else would a market system work?) nullify these intentions as they have been so often frustrated in the past? Would guidance by taxes and subsidies be powerful enough to overcome the profound inertias of occupational and industrial patterns of activity, or would these too persist, finding ways around the tax or subsidy structure to achieve ends at variance with those of the planners? I raise these questions in an apparent mood of skepticism, disillusioned with respect to the “reforming” powers of the market in the face of the wholesale cheating and evasion that seem to be endemic and irrepressible in a market system.

But that is not my deepest cause for doubt.

Perhaps socialism can induce or legislate a high standard of law-abiding behavior. There still remains another objection to the market as the “system” of socialism. If the market is to work, marketers must follow its dictates. Because we can assume that socialism will not permit individuals to suffer economic misery, we can assume that marketers will not follow these dictates by necessity, for survival’s sake. They will follow them for gain.

Now comes the crucial question: is this motivation compatible with the collective moral commitment that is to replace the self-centeredness of bourgeois society? Socialists have always railed against the invidious striving of the market that forces individuals to subordinate their full personalities to narrow economic roles. Moreover, it is not only the motivations of capitalists that are at stake—perhaps, under socialism, managers could be trained to obey price signals simply as a guide to steering their nationalized enterprises, with no thought of personal profit. The issue is the motivation of working people. For the market mechanism is not merely a means to profit. It is also a means to individual betterment by the maximization of one’s income. Without this drive, the mechanism will not work.

But is the drive for private gain compatible with the goal of socialism? I do not see how it can be. The market system, in order to function, requires attitudes of self-seeking that are in direct conflict with the goal of an “other-oriented” society. If socialism seeks to avoid both the anarchy and alienation of capitalism, it must seek to break the hold of the market, not merely over the economy but over the mind.<sup>1</sup>

IV

**T**hus the market cannot become the main order-bestowing system underlying socialism as a new order. Some limited reliance on a market mechanism may be necessary to achieve efficiency, for I doubt whether an industrial society could operate without price signals; some areas of market activity may serve as a vent for unwanted but insistent

aspects of human behavior, much as do the controlled red-light districts of certain countries. But I do not see how the market mentality can be encouraged within socialism, *if socialism is to be distinguished from capitalism by a different kind of socioeconomic formation*. With much reluctance I am led to conclude that the market process, for all its flexibility, extreme decentralization, and self-regulation—indeed, ultimately *because* of these properties, all of which depend on market behavior—is not congenial to socialism as a new kind of social order.

If tradition cannot, and the market system should not, underpin the socialist order, we are left with some form of command as the necessary means for securing its continuance and adaptation. Indeed, that is what planning means. Command by planning need not, of course, be totalitarian. But an aspect of authoritarianism resides inextricably in all planning systems. A plan is meaningless if it is not carried out, or if it can be ignored or defied at will. Some form of penalty must assure the necessary degree of compliance. Compliance need not be total, and penalties need not be Draconian. Incentives may succeed where punishments fail. But planning will not assure a socialist society of a capacity to endure or adapt unless the planning is a system of effective *command*. From that conclusion I see no escape.

This does not mean that socialism is doomed to repeat the disasters of central planning in the Soviet Union, where things are so bad that the system teeters on the verge of its own kind of anarchy. Perhaps associations of workers, long the ideal form of socialist “ownership,” can replace rigid hierarchies of managership. Perhaps democratic and participatory procedures can break up the bureaucratic inertia of planning systems.

Nevertheless an inescapable necessity must be faced. The economy must be concerted. However democratic the internal organization of society, however much the principle of workers’ control, or civil-servant stewardship, are carried into practice, the factories and stores and farms and shops of a socialist

socioeconomic formation must be coordinated, if socialism is not to become even more anarchic than capitalism. And this coordination must entail obedience to a central plan.<sup>2</sup>

V  
It is clear by now that a great deal hinges on the determination that socialism be defined in terms of a distinct socioeconomic order, “beyond” that of welfare capitalism. Before we examine that question further, I want to explore one remaining aspect of the idea of such a new socioeconomic order, an aspect on which my argument has repeatedly turned, although it has not yet been placed at stage center. The issue concerns the culture that must characterize a social order deserving the name of “socialism.”

Surely socialism will have its unique culture. Every major chapter of socioeconomic history—primitive life, “Asiatic despotisms,” classical antiquity, medieval life, capitalism—has been identifiable by a distinct culture, recognizable not only in styles of art and philosophy and religious imagination, but in the habits and customs, folkways and moralities of daily life.

The culture of capitalism is “bourgeois.” By bourgeois we mean a culture that celebrates, supports, encourages and breeds the idea of the primary importance of the *individual*. Certainly, that is the theme on which current ideology endlessly harps. If the culture of socialism is to be different, I presume that it must celebrate, support, encourage and breed the idea of the primary importance of the *collectivity*. In addition, I believe that the culture of socialism must depart from that of capitalism in a different way. Bourgeois culture is focused on the *material achievement* of the individual. Socialist culture must focus on his or her *moral or spiritual achievement*. A socialist society should be as suffused and preoccupied with the idea of moral purpose as capitalist society is suffused and preoccupied with that of personal gain.

I do not think there is much disagreement that some such collective morality is generally assumed to constitute an integral part of a

genuine socialist order. Even the critics of socialism recognize this new moral commitment, and only doubt that it can be reached in practice. "You can't change human nature," is the standard dismissal of the vision of a society of heightened social concern.

I shall not examine that objection here. Perhaps at some very deep level it is true. Yet I see no reason to doubt that something resembling a socialist morality could be attained, however slowly and painfully and partially. Anyone who reflects on the difference between our own culture and that of the Aztec or Incan, Bedouin or Eskimo worlds, will be slow to affirm that a culture cannot be reached simply because it is so different from ours, so contrary to the way we see "human nature."

The issue I want to raise is quite different. It has to do with a problem that I believe to be as deeply embedded in a true socialist culture, *once that culture is attained*, as the necessity for a command form of economic organization is embedded in its socioeconomic structure. This cultural problem is the difficulty that a socialist culture will experience in accepting the tolerant political and perhaps social attitudes of bourgeois life.

I do not mean to exaggerate this tolerance in capitalist societies. There is a vast amount of repression in bourgeois culture. Yet one must ask oneself how it is that a magazine like *Dissent*, dedicated to the discussion—worse, the advocacy—of socialism can be permitted to exist. Why does capitalist society allow its subversive universities, presses, political movements to say and write and argue their seditious ideas? One answer, of course, is that bourgeois society is confident that the subversion of these ideas is negligible; that less harm is done to the legitimacy of the prevailing faith by ignoring than by persecuting these ideas. But that answer does not explain the relatively high threshold of psychological security (of complacency, if you will) that allows capitalist society to permit these *potentially* dangerous expressions to exist. Medieval society did not tolerate them. Classical Greek society did not. Soviet or Maoist society does not. Why, then, does bourgeois society find

itself able to accept and ignore dissent to the degree it does?

The answer has two aspects. One, which we admire and like to advance, is that a culture founded on the primacy of the individual naturally asserts the rights of individuals to speak their minds freely, to act as they wish within reasonable bounds, to behave as John Stuart Mill preached in his treatise *On Liberty*.

I do not doubt that this is an important reason for the bourgeois tolerance of dissent. But there is another reason, less noticed because it consists in the absence of something, rather than in its forceful presence. This is the lack, within bourgeois society, of a *moral significance* attaching to most political or social acts or ideas. Dissenting thought appears within bourgeois society as a mere commodity in the "marketplace" of ideas, to use the common and illuminating phrase. Alternative life styles, departures in policies, new directions for individual or national activity are considered as "options" yielding calculable costs and benefits, or as "propositions" that can be considered in a detached and pragmatic light. Of course, there is always a threshold of sensitivity. Attacks on property, on the legitimacy of government itself, on sexual or other prejudices are very difficult (although not impossible) for a bourgeois society to accept. But I must ask my readers to weigh the degree of bourgeois tolerance for revolutionary parties or "wild" ideas against their toleration in *any* nonbourgeois culture—primitive, despotic, religious, or "state capitalist."

The reason for the difference, I suggest, lies precisely in the divorce of bourgeois culture from a sense of moral commitment and concern. Dissident political and social beliefs in bourgeois society may be considered as erroneous, foolish, shocking, deplorable, or dangerous, but *they are not thought of as blasphemous*. Dissent is not intolerable because it does not breach a profound sense of what is good.

Yet, if a socialist society is to attain the culture of moral commitment to which it aspires, it must view its politics and its social

mores as guided by a desire to be good, not merely expedient. Dissents, disagreements, and departures from norms then assume a far more threatening aspect than under bourgeois society, for they hold out the possibility of destroying the very commitment to a moral consensus by which socialist society differs from capitalist.

Nor can we wriggle off this hook by asserting that, among its moral commitments, socialism will choose to include the rights of individuals to their Millian liberties. For that celebration of individualism is directly opposed to the basic socialist commitment to a deliberately embraced collective moral goal. Perhaps we get a sense of the tensions that are likely to trouble socialist society when we reflect on the difficulty with which democratic bourgeois society copes with those ideas or activities that threaten the democratic process itself. But under socialism, every dissenting voice raises a threat similar to that raised under a democracy by those who preach antidemocracy. Because socialist society aspires to be a *good* society, all its decisions and opinions are inescapably invested with moral import. Every disagreement with them, every argument for alternative policies, every nay-saying voice therefore raises into question the moral validity of the existing government, not merely its competence in directing activities that have no particular moral significance. Dissents and disagreements thereby smack of heresy in a manner lacking from societies in which expediency and not morality rules the roost.

**T**hese conclusions will distress or even outrage many readers, because they seem to be nothing but the familiar conservative or reactionary warnings that socialism is incompatible with freedom, and therefore reprehensible. But I do not intend to join this chorus of admonishing voices. Instead, let us ask what consequences follow from my argument that socialism, as a chapter of history truly beyond welfare capitalism, is likely to present structural and cultural aspects that are distasteful

## VI

or unacceptable to many present-day socialists.

The first possibility is immediately evident. It is to avoid the difficulties of our position by undoing our original premise. Once we give up the insistence that socialism must be a new departure in history, we bypass many of the hard conclusions to which we have been forced. We can maintain the self-correcting, self-propelling mechanism of a market-oriented economy—a decision that vastly simplifies the organizational problem of socialism. We can retain an individualist, rather than collective, general orientation. Socialism can then be described as a *program* rather than a new social order. Its programmatic content is not hard to describe: a search for economic equity in society, for the constriction of property rights, for humanizing the work process, for democratic participation, personal cultivation, civil liberties, and the like. As I have mentioned before, I do not take such a program lightly; I repeat that it may be the best we can do to cope with certain present evils without jeopardizing the liberties we desire to defend.

Yet, we must be clear about the consequences of this choice. Socialism then becomes a movement *within* welfare capitalism, not beyond it. The retention of the market system implies as well the likelihood of problems of “anarchy”: the retention of an individualistic orientation probably brings many of the problems of anomie, malaise, “alienation.” The idea of radical change would therefore be relinquished in favor of incremental change—a slow and uneven advance that would keep, perhaps indefinitely, some of the most important characteristics of capitalism. Socialism then becomes an unending and perhaps ultimately futile struggle to “humanize” a society based on the inhuman imperatives and ideologies of capital.

Revolutionary socialists will reject such a defeatist position. They must then accept the price of a leap into the future. There are respectable arguments for such a position. One can press for socialism as a new chapter beyond welfare capitalism because one

believes that ills to which socialism would address itself are greater by far than those it will create. The anarchy of capitalism is, after all, an immense evil for millions of persons in the West, hundreds of millions or even billions, if we widen our view to include the globe. The anomie, alienation and purposelessness of an individualistic way of life extend far and deep under capitalism, robbing existence of the stabilizing certainties that have guided it under all other forms of social organization. Capitalism alone exposes its constituents to the anxiety of life without the succor of a collective morality. One can argue that the repair of these damages is worth far more than the curtailment of economic freedom or the diminution of personal liberty that socialism will require. And then, too, there is the thought that those who will live under socialism will no more regret the absence of vanished privileges than we regret those of earlier ages. We do not lament the vanished rights of aristocracy. A generation accustomed to the supporting discipline of socialism will not miss those of bourgeois individualism.

There will remain some socialists who cannot accept this rationale. There remains for them a third choice. Socialism can then be viewed as a direction of historic change whose underlying tendencies are those I have described. That does not require the conclusion that every socialist society must sink to the worst levels of tyranny and oppression, any more than the presence of anarchic and alienating tendencies in capitalism requires

that every such society become a grotesque version of its latent tendencies. Rather, from this perspective, socialism becomes a historical drift that can no longer be viewed uncritically as a deliverance, but must be regarded as a process that will bring unwanted changes as well as desired ones.

What is important, in trying to think about socialism, is to resist the delusion that history is so soft and indeterminate that we can have a socialist cake with bourgeois icing. A searching examination of the requirements for a truly new order forces us to recognize that deep qualitative differences must separate such a socialism from the society in which we live. The new order of socialism may display many surface variations and some vestiges of bourgeois ways, but at bottom it must differ from capitalism as capitalism, despite its variations and aristocratic remnants, differs at bottom from feudalism. This requires a much more sober estimation of socialism than is now generally to be found. Above all, it requires the bitter admission that socialism cannot be the best of all worlds, as we creatures of bourgeois society judge what is best. If we wish to bestow the name socialism on the next chapter of history, we must not expect it to be written in the vocabulary of a period that is finished. □

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>This is the logic behind Marx's opposition to money itself. "Greed," he writes, "as such [is] impossible without money; all other kinds of accumulation and of mania for accumulation appear as primitive, restricted by needs on the one hand and by the restricted nature of products on the other (*sacri aura fames*)." *Grundrisse* (London: 1973), p. 163.

<sup>2</sup>This general argument is given special urgency if we emphasize two historic problems that I have deliberately passed over in this essay. The first is the necessity to intervene deeply, and probably ruthlessly, into the economy in order to establish the socialist order in the first place. The second is the need to continue a policy of painful intervention to accommodate the socialist economy, once set into place, to the constricting limits of the environment. □

**disrent!**

**HAVE YOU MOVED?**

●  
Send both old and new address to  
**DISSENT: 509 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10017**

●  
*Allow three weeks  
for change to become effective*



# Lewis Coser

“Sometimes,” says the protagonist in Robert Pirsing’s novel *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, echoing Montaigne, “it is a little better to travel than to arrive.” The trouble with Robert Heilbroner’s argument is that he is unwilling to consider this possibility. As in much of his previous writing, Heilbroner is so obsessed with what allegedly awaits us at the end of the road that he is rather unattentive to the benefits that may accrue to us as, hesitantly and stumblingly, we make our way on it. But it won’t do to disdain the real gains in the human condition that have been made on the road from unrestricted capitalism to the welfare state.

Though he permits himself in places to say some nice things about the welfare state, the overall drift of his argument is designed to denigrate it and to characterize it as just another face of capitalist domination. He even argues that “the welfare state . . . is a kind of apotheosis of capitalism.” This is about as useful as calling 17th-century absolutism a kind of apotheosis of feudalism. The social and political structure of, say, France in the 17th century, its culture and its life styles, were qualitatively different from those of the Middle Ages—even though certain key institutions of the *ancien régime* were only swept away by the French Revolution. In the same way, an advanced welfare state, in which planned policy has partly replaced the unplanned operation of the market, and in which the unseen hand of God has given way in many sectors of the polity and the economy to the visible powers of regulating agencies, may be called an “apotheosis of capitalism” only in a Pickwickian sense. All of this is not to deny the enormous weight of the corporate giants that bestride many an industry and can exert inordinate sway in the economy as a whole. It is only to assert that in the advanced welfare state other powers have been able to contain and countervail them in major sectors of public

life. I hold no brief for even an advanced welfare state, indeed I wish ardently to go beyond it, but I must still insist that to see in it the zenith of capitalism, rather than an indication that it might have reached its nadir, seems rather short-sighted.

To be sure the welfare state has not abolished capitalism and the profit motive, it still contains many of the evils that marked the preceding epoch, but it is emphatically a very different animal than classical capitalism. One may, of course, always argue that it is still “basically” capitalism, but this term is analytically so vacuous that it can hardly serve as well. As a matter of fact, “basic” breaks in human history are extremely rare. Powerful analysts, such as de Tocqueville, have even argued that prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary France were “basically” more similar than dissimilar. Most transformations on the human scene proceed relatively slowly, gradually, and in an incremental manner, rather than through apocalyptic breaks. Is the New South “basically” the same as the Old South? Is the Germany of today “basically” the same as that of Bismarck? Is the role of women “basically” the same as it was in the Victorian age? Such questions really are no more enlightening than the famous dispute on whether the glass of water is half full or half empty. It all depends on your point of view.

Heilbroner’s fixation on the “basic” continuity of capitalism from *laissez faire* to the welfare state leads him to another mistake. He fails to see that the welfare state, far from developing “naturally” out of unrestrained capitalism, came into being largely through the continued struggle of labor and union organizations. It continues to exist and develop because of the unrelenting struggle of these forces. The welfare state, even though it has proved congenial to certain sectors of managerial and capitalist interests, is largely the result of continuous pressures on the

haves by the have-nots. It is not a novel measure of social control, as Marcuse and his friends assert, but, like the eight-hour day of an earlier time, a result of the assertion of power on behalf of the underdog. As Alistair MacIntyre (in his fine critical appraisal of *Herbert Marcuse*, Viking, New York, 1970) says so well: "The notion that the ruling elite are now able to treat welfare as an institution of social control is at very best a quarter-truth, and a very dangerous one."

I suppose that others will address themselves in some detail to this part of Heilbroner's paper, and prefer therefore to deal in greater detail with what I think is Heilbroner's most powerful argument: the contention that socialism must necessarily enforce a collectivistic morality in counterpoint to the rampant individualism of the bourgeois age.

I cannot follow him when he characterizes bourgeois culture as one "that celebrates, supports, encourages, and breeds the idea of the primary importance of the individual." Individualism, however, emerged in courtly and aristocratic circles during the Renaissance and is by no means a bourgeois invention. It later was developed largely in struggles *against* bourgeois society. More important, I had supposed that, if there was any basic agreement among socialist critics of bourgeois culture, it involved the notion that this culture rested on the enhancement of the individualism and autonomy of *some* individuals at the price of the repression of the individuality of most others. If that is not the message that is conveyed by Fourier or Proudhon, by Marx or Norman Thomas, then I have misread all of them through a lifetime of study.

THE WHOLE SOCIALIST TRADITION has centered upon the criticism of bourgeois society as stultifying, thwarting, and stunting the capacities of human beings. What else did Marx mean when he talked about the alienating conditions of bourgeois life? Most of the classical socialist tradition maintained that socialist culture would for the first time allow the full flowering of individuality. Far from advocating, as Heilbroner claims, "the

primary importance of the collectivity," it argued instead that only a fundamental restructuring of the conditions of collective life would permit the full development of human autonomy.

But no matter what the initial intentions of its founders might be, Heilbroner argues, a future socialist society, being necessarily built on the primacy of command over self-direction, will have to be anti-individualistic. It cannot, he asserts, permit the kind of *laissez faire* attitude in the sphere of manners and morals that characterized the bourgeois age. But this *laissez faire* attitude is, I think, mainly a creature of Heilbroner's imagination. In the period of bourgeois ascendancy, in the period of primitive accumulation, bourgeois culture was built on severe repression, even among its leading strata. The world of the Protestant Ethic and of Mr. Gradgrind was hardly a world of hedonistic pleasures, sensory indulgences, or assertion of unfettered human autonomy. Only the self-denying ordinances of Protestant and utilitarian culture allowed the accumulation of the capital needed for the emergence of capitalism triumphant. At later stages of bourgeois development such restrictions came to be progressively removed. And under late capitalism, and in the age of the welfare state, hedonistic enjoyment (to the sorrow of Daniel Bell) came to be a valid option in an increasingly pluralistic moral universe.

But if that be the case, why must we assume that under socialism such pluralistic options will no longer be available? I suppose that we are all agreed that a socialism of scarcity is a contradiction in terms. Given a relative abundance of resources, there will be no need of excessive restraint. Heilbroner argues that a socialist society must enforce common uniform standards because it wishes "to be good, not merely expedient." But this is not, as they say, necessarily so. Richard Tawney answered Heilbroner over half a century ago when he wrote:

It is obvious, indeed, that no change of system or machinery can avert the causes of social *malaise* which consist in the egotism, greed, or quarrelsomeness of human nature. What it can do is to

create an environment in which these are not the qualities which are encouraged. It cannot secure that men live up to their principles. What it can do is to establish their social order upon principles to which, if they please, they can live up and not down. It cannot control their actions. It can offer them an end upon which to fix their minds.

It is not true, as Heilbroner says, "that celebration of individualism is directly opposed to the basic socialist commitment to a deliberately embraced *collective* moral goal." The society of which Tawney dreamed, and of which I dream, does not force people to be good, it simply removes some of the impediments that previously did not permit them to be good. It provides incentives for autonomous individuals, no longer driven by the compulsions of an acquisitive society, to choose paths of self-realization that do not conflict with the collective well-being. Solidarity and fraternity do not contradict the need for self-realization; they make it possible.

One last word: Heilbroner subscribes to the kind of "historicism" against which Karl Popper has directed his shafts for many years. He somehow assumes that a reified "history" drives people inevitably into some predetermined future. Against any such deterministic scheme one needs to insist that the future can never be predetermined since men and women in the here and now make it happen. If the future is, in fact, open (although partly bound by structural conditions and trends), then it behooves us to reject messages of despair such as those of Heilbroner since they might well turn into self-fulfilling predictions if they attract a wide hearing. The myth of inevitable progress served to emasculate transformative capacities by seemingly making voluntary activity supererogatory. The myth of the inevitable tyranny of the collective could serve to emasculate the prepotent desire of human beings to reach a society in which the free development of each is based on the free development of all. □

## Bogdan Denitch

**R**obert Heilbroner raises a cardinal question: can *socialism* be democratic? Clearly, it is not a question of whether socialists are democrats, nor whether the various reforms of capitalism that socialists propose here and now are consistent with democracy. Heilbroner poses the more serious question: in a socialist society, the one presumably beyond the welfare state, the one in which socialists are no longer just adding one more reform to a pyramid of welfare-state reforms—in short, in a society in which the basic means of production, distribution, and exchange are socially owned, and no capitalist class is left as a class, can democratic institutions, as we understand them, continue to exist?

Part of the problem lies in the relatively

mechanical definition of what a socialist society would have to look like. There is a commonly held definition, espoused not only by such economists as Paul Sweezy who have no problem with the question, since their response is that socialism shall not be democratic, but also held by most of the Fabians and the more moderate social democrats who all had the notion that centralized planning was a feature that is indispensable to socialism, and that centralized planning would inevitably involve an enormous concentration of political and economic power in the hands of those who plan. In socialist critiques of the Soviet dictatorship, the formulation often used was: in a society where the state owns all the means of production, distribution, and exchange,

the sole relevant question is who “owns” the state. Socialist critics of the Soviet Union concluded that, since the political bureaucracy had a monopoly on the relevant decisions, it “owned” the state, and that the state therefore represented the interests of this class (stratum, group, or whatever) rather than those of the working class and the population as a whole.

In a socialist society where the monopoly of power would presumably not be as highly concentrated in a layer of top planners and bureaucrats and where parliamentary institutions and normal civil liberties would continue, this criticism would still maintain some force. It is, after all, a truism in modern political democracies that less and less power is wielded by the legislatures, and more and more is transferred to bureaucracies. Granted, these can be selfless, well-wishing bureaucracies; but the notion is that modern society requires a level of expertise that can be mobilized at decisive points and that, for practical purposes, makes the experts the rulers. This would be all the more so if the economy as a whole were in the hands of the same government experts who control the political mechanisms.

Heilbroner’s second point—that a socialist bureaucracy would be more actively involved in governing because it is concerned with doing good and therefore more impatient with obstacles, disagreements, and inefficiency—all characteristic of the democratic process—is a separate and extremely interesting point, though I do not choose to pursue it at this time. If one grants the first assumption of bureaucratic planning at the center, in a society fundamentally unchanged from the present one in terms of values and distribution of power, the second point does follow. But there is more than one tradition of socialism, and it is important to stress this diversity of socialist traditions. Whether one calls it socialism from above or socialism from below, refers back to the debates between Shaw and Wells among the British Fabians, or stresses the centralist versus the syndicalist strands of the socialist tradition in Europe, it is clear that on this question of centralized

planning and control there is ambivalence. Heilbroner stresses only one tradition. It has an honorable pedigree, but nevertheless it has, in my opinion, little to do with what a modern, highly industrialized socialist society would or should look like. The socialism of centralized planning is, in one way or another, a socialism of scarcity.

THERE IS another approach that could be called self-governing or self-managing socialism. It has an increasingly wide acceptance both among West European Socialists and East European dissident democratic Communists. The second have had direct and painful experience with the problem of centralization while the first are in part reacting to the dull welfare states established in Europe in the post-World War II period. Here the tradition is more syndicalist than centralist. It is based on a set of assumptions that have been submitted to prolonged testing in Yugoslavia, though under far from optimal conditions.

Whatever one thinks of Yugoslavia—and it is a one-party state—the economy has shown a great deal of autonomy from the center and, more to the point, numbers of previously uninvolved individuals have become successfully involved in running complex enterprises and institutions. The result is a more efficient and effective system than any centralized economy in Eastern Europe. While the Yugoslav experience does not tell us much about the political system appropriate to a democratic socialist society, it does posit an economy run essentially by elected bodies of workers and other employees. These elected bodies have had ever widening powers. They have acted—and this is crucial—not merely as institutions managing sectors of the economy, but as organs of political socialization creating a new nexus of values and links in an industrialized society.

Two issues are involved. One is: can elected workers’ councils run an economy without prohibitive costs in terms of efficiency? The answer seems clearly to be, yes. To be sure, there are problems. Sometimes wrong decisions are made, but apparently not more

often than in centrally planned economies. What is remarkable is not that there are problems, but how sustained the rate of growth produced by such an economy was in the decade before the general European slump of the 1970s. During that decade Yugoslav growth figures approximated those of Japan. It is that, after all, which made the Yugoslav economic model so attractive to the liberalizing reformers of Eastern Europe. The second issue, however, is more interesting for the prospect of a democratic socialism, and this is the nature of institutions developing within such an economy. The economic enterprise also becomes a socio-political community. It is the place from which political and economic power is aggregated in the system as a whole. It is the place through which the newly industrialized peasants learn the rules of the game of an industrial society. It is the place through which the notion of individual and collective rights is taught and asserted. And it is a community in which a set of values consistent with the new socialist civilization will have to develop, if there is to be such a civilization.

Here the problems are even more troublesome, for this means a society in which there is considerable pressure to participate and take responsibility. It means a society in which, since the work enterprise is one in which you expect to spend a good part of your life, one does not push differences to the knife. The mechanism, the style, is communitarian and consensual rather than conflictual. The pressures are toward egalitarian leveling, since in enterprise work councils the more skilled cadres are forced to argue *why* they should be paid more than other employees—sometimes a painful experience for surgeons talking to nurses and other workers in a hospital but one that I would argue has a good bit to do with socialist democracy.

There are two key elements that seem indispensable to a working decentralized self-managing economy. Again looking at the Yugoslav experience, it seems clear that without these, the workers' councils become a sham, as they indeed have become in Poland and Hungary. The first is that the councils

must have genuine economic power and must take responsibility for decisions they make, including bad ones. This had dictated the development of a socialist *market* economy for a very simple reason. Something, some institution or mechanism that at least appears reasonably impartial had to be developed to replace the bureaucratic planning center. The mechanism that seemed most adaptable was a limited market. Socialist theorists, with such rare exceptions as Oscar Lange and some of the more recent Yugoslav and Polish theorists, have had a dogmatic, almost puritanical attitude toward the market. Presumably, harking back to the young Marx, the market reifies commodities and work and encourages the development of some kind of consumer sovereignty that socialist intellectuals all too often think is bad for ordinary mortals.

There are two sides to this aversion. One is a predilection of socialist intellectuals toward neat, organized plans run by experts not too unlike themselves; the other is a notion that if consumers of the lower orders are turned loose, they will not choose things that are good for them. Both are elitist conceptions and have only survived in the socialist movement for so long because of the association of the market with private ownership and great concentrations of wealth and power. But there is no reason why a modified market cannot be used, on the one hand, as a yardstick to measure the performance of enterprises and, on the other, as a determinant of the consumer goods that the public wants. I have never found it a moral question that teenagers in Yugoslavia, or in Poland, yearn for Levis. Apparently centralized planners do. There seems to be a moral feeling that centrally designed, badly fitting pants are more appropriate for socialists than Levis. There, I suspect, the authoritarian bureaucrats of Eastern Europe probably have a good deal in common with the tradition in the Western socialist movement that parts of the British Labour party represented. I sometimes believe that Sir Stafford Cripps *preferred* to have rationing. A market economy in a socialist society may well lead to

some hedonistic waste and frivolities for the plebeians; I believe it to be a good thing.

A MORE SERIOUS PROBLEM with a socialist market economy, at least in Yugoslavia—I am still using it as a model—is that various institutions other than plants are also run by workers' councils operating in a market setting. This has posed painful debates in the field of culture and in some service delivery institutions. Do the local cultural funds go to build more football fields or chamber-music orchestras? It is surprising how readily socialist intellectuals spring to elitist solutions. The truth is that within that particular market economy, workers' councils dominated by blue-collar workers have proven more generous in subsidizing "high culture" than have their betters, either in state-run "socialism" or under capitalism. This is not to say that they have not made mistakes. It is simply to say that it does not follow that if blue-collar workers are given power over social and cultural expenditures, which presumably is what we mean by saying "to extend democracy into the economy and society," that an era of barbarism would follow. The Yugoslav metal industry, with two-thirds of the councils composed of blue-collar workers, has generously subsidized chamber music, avant-garde theater, operas and the like—in fact, somewhat more generously than the previous centralized system had done. The painful process involved was that various intellectuals were forced to go before the councils and argue their case for funding, an indignity they object to far less when it has to be done before a local equivalent of the Ford and Carnegie foundations.

This dwelling on what seems an almost peripheral issue of the democratic financing of culture in a democratically managed socialist economy is to lead up to my central point. Democratic socialists have had, all too often, far too mean and narrow an image of what a socialist democracy could look like. It is in response to this mean and narrow image that Heilbroner's polemic makes some sense.

A socialist culture would, in my opinion, have to center on the process of production, the term being taken in its widest meaning. There is no reason to assume that history came to a stop with the development of liberal political institutions of the Anglo-Saxon peoples; that the end of history and the sole model of democracy is the multiparty polity based on geographical representation. After all, a good case can be made for functional representation in geographically mobile societies, and whatever else the virtues of multiparty representation have been so far, they have been remarkably successful in keeping the lower strata from participation in governance other than in occasional elections. A democracy that will result in government by lawyers, or at best professional trade-union functionaries, seems to me a somewhat narrow definition of that term. And while Yugoslavia is clearly not the image of a democratic socialist society, at least it challenges our imagination in regard to ways that popular participation can be built into an economy and to the various possible social and cultural institutions. Without this participation, I believe that most of the talk about democracy in an industrial society of the modern type is a sham.

Nothing in the argument so far should be taken even as a hint that the classic civil liberties won in bourgeois societies (not "bourgeois" democracy but democracy won from the bourgeoisie) would not need to be maintained in a socialist society. What I am addressing myself to, rather, is the more troublesome question of how to create autonomous pockets of power in a society where the economy is socially controlled. The more serious critics of socialism have always picked on this feature of a socialist society as the one that facilitates the development of authoritarianism. Under capitalism, presumably, independent centers of power exist in the economy that can control what happens in the civil society or at least set limits to it. Therefore, it is necessary in thinking about a post-welfare socialism to think of how, in such a society, centers of autonomous, legitimate, and institutionalized

power could be created. This is far more important than the question of whether or not political parties, which would also exist, would be able to offer alternate platforms every once in a while. What institutions would have the capacity, politically and economically, to say no? This in turn means that there would be a continual tension in a socialist society between two goods—the autonomous, self-governing institutions and the need to coordinate these institutions for greater public good. Within this tension, continual debate and dialogue would continue.

My last point is that the underpinning of a self-governing economy requires a working population with capacities to utilize such an institutional framework. This problem has been grossly exaggerated by some critics because of a tendency to place too much emphasis on expertise and formalized training. The modern industrial working class is far better educated than was its 19th-century predecessor, and it is no longer willing to concede legitimate authority in the economy based on a supposed monopoly of expertise held by the owners and managers. This is so whether one thinks of the working class as limited to blue-collar workers or takes the

term in its wider meaning to include the technical and white-collar strata who are often, if anything, better educated than their supervisors.

The rising educational level of the working population may not argue for the establishment of self-managing institutions in the economy, but it certainly does challenge the maintenance of rigidly hierarchical models that are prevalent under capitalism and state “socialism.” Just as there has been a rising involvement of sectors of the middle class in local government, urban decentralization, and school management, it would seem that an analogous development is occurring in large-scale institutions and industries in Western Europe. Unions and workers increasingly show an impatience with the assumption that decisions affecting their lives cannot be made democratically within the workplace. I believe ultimately, therefore, that it is in this direction that the real answer to Heilbroner’s argument lies. Can socialism be democratic? Yes; otherwise, of course, it will not be worth its name or worth supporting. But more to the point, yes—provided socialists do not permit their imaginations to be crippled by the limits of liberal democracy under capitalism. □

## Michael Harrington

I think it may be possible to have a “socialist cake with bourgeois icing.” But I must immediately add that posing the issue that way obscures some of its essentials.

In saying this I do not dismiss Robert Heilbroner’s argument out of hand, for he touches on a real problem. My objection is that Heilbroner has somewhat simplified and mislabeled a complex trend in a way that, ironically, might contribute to the worst of his

fears. There are, I think, two polar extremes that will define the social space in which the postcapitalist future will develop (is developing): authoritarian, bureaucratic collectivism, and democratic, communitarian collectivism. Heilbroner is quite right to warn us against that first possibility, but by giving it the name of its polar opposite—by calling it “socialism”—he unwittingly makes it all the more difficult to fight against it.

Bourgeois society, Heilbroner argues, gives primacy to the individual as part of its economic focus on personal gain. It tolerates dissent, and even revolutionary criticism, because it is, in some considerable measure, indifferent to ideals, even its own. Socialist society, on the other hand, will require “command” planning and, precisely because of its passionate moral commitment to the common good, is likely not to tolerate dissidence in the way its amoral, pragmatic, and cynical predecessor did.

To my mind, Heilbroner vastly overstates the tolerance that capitalist society *voluntarily* grants to its opponents. But it would be unfair to pursue such details, because he has obviously compressed his analysis into a small compass and would, I suspect, agree with most of my historical amendments to it. Even more to the point, I want to concentrate on the basic differences between us. They have to do with the relationship between political and economic power in bourgeois, socialist, and bureaucratic collectivist societies.

Capitalism is the first social-economic formation in which political and economic power are separated and the surplus is pumped out of the direct producers by economic, rather than political, means. This is an exceedingly complex reality, and I will here ignore aspects of it that would be important in a rounded analysis. I propose to focus narrowly on one strand of this phenomenon that is most relevant to Heilbroner’s case.

I think that Heilbroner fails to analyze both the function and the (related) limitations of personal freedom within capitalism. It is not the “icing” of that system but a structural constituent of it. On the one hand, Heilbroner does not give capitalism sufficient credit because he does not see how central democracy was to its development; on the other hand, he does not recognize the profound limits of *bourgeois* democracy, limits that derive precisely from its functional necessity. And this failure to grasp the historic and systemic particularity of capitalist democracy keeps him from seeing the possibilities of socialist democracy.

It is the genius of capitalism that it presents

its grimmest necessities as freedoms. The worker is not forced to pay a tribute established by tradition and exacted by the sword. He or she freely contracts to work or freely decides to starve. The role played by the various despots of precapitalism is taken over by the impersonal laws of the market, which impartially apply to the rich and the poor. And bourgeois democracy—political equality structurally limited, and sometimes vitiated, by economic inequality—is not only ideally suited to a system in which economic power is juridically private. It also reinforces the individualistic illusions that facilitate the growth of the most productive social system humanity has ever known. Capitalism needs democracy—but democracy of a certain, antidemocratic type.

Indeed, the politicalization of economic power in late capitalism is, as Jurgen Habermas has brilliantly analyzed, one of the sources of a crisis of legitimacy in the system. As the invisible hand is replaced by the visible—groups, regions, and even nations begin to demand that the results be fair. The problem is, of course, that even though non-, and sometimes anti-, capitalist means are being used to preserve capitalism, the essential foundations of bourgeois power have not been disturbed. This is why the welfare state normally follows corporate priorities.

WHAT IS the socialist response to this situation? The socialist essential, it must always be remembered, is not the plan; it is the democratic power of the people over the plan and the planners. The very core of capitalist power is the domination of a tiny minority over the basic investment decisions that shape the future of society behind the backs of the people and perpetuates the maldistribution of wealth at the same time. When that structure is transformed, the “icing” of bourgeois democracy is not placed on top of the socialist cake. Rather, the possibility of democracy *tout court* is established for the first time.

Fine words. But isn’t Heilbroner right that planners’ decisions could lead in the direction of authoritarianism? Of course he is. My



objection is not that he identifies that very real possibility—but that he tends to treat it as the *only* possibility. This narrow focus becomes quite apparent in the choice of a critical word: “some form of command” is necessary to the socialist order. The term “command” predetermines the judgment that will be made by anyone who uses it. What must be done—in theory and in practice—is to counterpose democratic planning to command planning. Obviously, that counterposition is easier said than done. But it is a possibility, and one that Heilbroner ignores.

All possible forms of postcapitalism will see the reintegration of the political and the economic, a trend that is already in furious motion in every country in the world. But there is a wide variety of political structures and—this is the great lesson that Stalinism should have taught us—they will determine who holds economic and social power. If I can use a distinction that I find misleading and dangerous in most other contexts, in the consciously directed societies of the future it is guaranteed that the “superstructure” will

control the “base.” The critical question is, whose “superstructure”?

One example: as society continues to develop its planning mechanisms, will there be formal, legal provisions and subsidies for counterplanners and counterplans? If not, the dictatorship of some or another bureaucracy on the basis of monopolizing the means of decision-making is likely; if so, there is the possibility of new forms of genuine democracy, which would be as central to a socialist system as skewed democracy is to the bourgeois system.

So I would not reject Heilbroner’s argument. I would amend it. Specifically, I would rewrite the last sentence in his next-to-last paragraph in this way:

From this perspective, collectivism becomes a historical drift that can no longer be viewed uncritically as a deliverance, but must be regarded as a process that will bring unwanted changes as well as desired ones. Socialism is the movement for the democratization of that collectivist trend which points in the direction of, and struggles for, the desirable changes. □

## Michael Walzer

**R**obert Heilbroner’s argument about “moral culture” can be summed up in this way: capitalist *laissez-faire* makes for toleration and liberty, if only because it leaves us utterly indifferent to each other’s opinions, while socialist solidarity would give us new reasons to worry about dissent and incline us toward repressive policies. It is a serious argument, and I don’t think it is wholly wrong. But one might tell the same story in a rather different fashion.

When men and women are cut loose from every kind of communal support, conceived as rational egotists, encouraged to think only

of themselves, they are in a certain sense, not an unimportant sense, set free. But they are not set free in ways that encourage political activity. They have more room in their private lives, but their lives are overwhelmingly private. They live in the narrow circle of family and business. They have friends, but not comrades. And, partly for these reasons, they are radically exposed to the pressures of the market. To some extent, these are pressures to conform, and surely the ability of the market to shape the tastes and opinions of masses of people ought to be disturbing to anyone who loves liberty. “They like in

crowds,” John Stuart Mill wrote, not of socialist but of bourgeois society.

But market pressures work also to exploit and trivialize, rather than eradicate, our personal, religious, and political differences. Heilbroner makes this point in explaining the range of contemporary tolerance, but it is relevant also to the issues of depth and seriousness. I am indeed free, let’s say, to celebrate a black mass in my living room; and if I am unlikely to escape television coverage, my neighbors will complain only about the cameramen on their lawns; they won’t say a word about my “religious preferences.” But what is the point of a black mass that everyone finds *interesting*? A similar argument holds with regard to secular and political forms of dissent. Dissent is parasitic on belief, and a society that privatizes and trivializes belief takes much of the meaning out of dissent. And then toleration is too easy.

I have no doubt at all as to the value of religious freedom; nor of political freedom. But I’m not sure that either can be sustained for long without the experience of conviction, solidarity, and struggle. Within bourgeois society, this experience has been provided, above all, by the effort to create a more just and egalitarian social order. Conceived ideally, however, the private lives of individuals-as-egotists do not generate enterprises of this sort and therefore do not test the seriousness of toleration. Private men and women are shaped instead by those patterns of inequality and passivity central to capitalist organization, into consumers and spectators, perpetually excited, sometimes satiated, often frustrated, but fundamentally dependent and acquiescent. Meaningful freedom depends, by contrast, on the existence of an active public life. Here again, I am following Mill: “the spirit of a commercial people,” he wrote, “will be essentially mean and slavish wherever public spirit is not cultivated by an extensive participation of the people in the business of government in detail. . . .”

Now, extensive participation of that kind is, I think, the core of socialism. The moral culture of socialism is rooted in a shared citizenship, the fellowship of the forum. We

seek a remedy for passivity and privatization in a radical democracy, opening new opportunities for collective decision-making, so that the beliefs of ordinary citizens become important. Men and women acquire dignity and strength by taking a stand among their peers. But taking a stand can also be dangerous: it invites disagreement and conflict, and it can in certain circumstances breed political fierceness and intolerance. If politics is serious, it cannot be entirely without risk.

But Heilbroner is wrong to suggest that socialist democracy requires everyone to take the same stand or that it involves the triumph of a single idea of the good. It involves something very different: the creation of a new forum in which ideas about the good can be disputed. Or better, a series of forums: since we are not primitivists and don’t intend a return to undifferentiated social structures or preindustrial economies, socialist politics is entirely compatible with pluralism. And if arguments go on within different and overlapping organizations, there must also be, and there will be, negotiation and compromise. Value attaches to the arguments themselves, not to particular outcomes. Some disagreements will be expressed in moral language, others in the language of expediency. It’s not likely that a proposal, say, to reorganize the steel industry, though it may well be called erroneous, foolish, dangerous, and so on, will be denounced as blasphemous. Indeed, I don’t see any reason to think that the formal structure of disagreement will be so different from what it is in bourgeois democracies. It is the participants who will be different.

BUT PERHAPS I have not confronted the strongest feature of Heilbroner’s argument. I am assuming that the deep morality of a socialist society will be self-respect and mutual respect, and that these will provide a better basis for freedom than can possibly be provided by mere egotism and indifference. But this may be true only for political freedom. The fellowship of the forum may encompass only those committed to the forum. One can imagine socialist democracy generating a kind of political highminded-

ness, intolerant of people without strong opinions and public interests. Perhaps this is what Heilbroner means when he speaks of “the primary importance of the collectivity.” Socialist citizens would expect one another to think about and to work for the common interest. It would be more offensive in socialist society than it is in bourgeois society to evade jury duty, cheat on your taxes, stay home from critical meetings. Certain forms of withdrawal might be harder to manage, private interests harder to defend. Every solidarity, I suppose, produces a new set of strangers. But I am not inclined to view this problem in the ultimate terms that Heilbroner sets. As bourgeois society has adjusted to a certain level of commitment among its citizens, so socialist society could adjust to a certain level of apathy. Of course, we will have to make sure that it does adjust and find ways to accommodate individual waywardness. In

socialist, as in capitalist society, vigilance will continue to be the price of liberty.

If we fail to produce an extensive participation of ordinary people in the business of government, then Heilbroner’s collectivism would be very dangerous. A statist regime, controlling economic as well as political life, authoritarian in character, might well find it convenient to stir up among its citizens (or subjects) a new sense of moral purpose. It might encourage them to ask, for example, “not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” It might use the language of socialist solidarity ideologically, to mask an actual impoverishment of public life. And that impoverishment, together with the coercive power of such a state, would certainly reduce the range of personal and political liberty. But this would not represent the triumph of socialism, but only one more defeat. □

## Robert L. Heilbroner: A Reply

I think that Lewis Coser is out of sympathy with my purpose and therefore misconstrues my argument. My purpose is to examine the idea of socialism *as a new socioeconomic formation*. These italicized words do not seem to get through. Mr. Coser avoids the problems they pose, or insists that there is no such problem. Well, I must humbly repeat my conviction that welfare capitalism *is* capitalism, however much nicer than nonwelfare capitalism, and that socialism presumably means something “basically” different. I have spelled out the basic difference, which can be compressed into *planning* and *morality*. Coser’s comment boils down to an insistence that we can have socialism with the same political and ideological constraints as in the best of capitalism. I do not think that history

will be so obliging. Perhaps this is what makes me guilty of “historicism” in his eyes.

I must add a word of sharp disagreement about the meaning and origins of “individualism.” By individualism I think we generally mean a conception of the relation between the person and society that puts the person first, society second. J. S. Mill’s *On Liberty* is the most famous exposition of this view. We also imply, I think, a strong emphasis on the equality of persons: equality before the law, equality in voting, equality in economic life as “equal” parties in exchange. Of course these views are often cruelly betrayed in bourgeois society, but that does not detract from their bourgeois origin or their bourgeois identity. Show me the John Stuart Mill of Greece or Rome, of feudal life or the aristocratic

courts, or of socialism in any of its realizations to date, and I will cede the point.

Messrs. Walzer, Harrington, and Denitch *do* see what I am driving at, for which I am grateful. In one way or another they all think I overstate my case, and perhaps they are right. It is arguable that socialism as a new socioeconomic order would present a spectrum of variations, just as capitalism does and feudalism or the slave orders did, and perhaps some of these socialist societies of the future will tolerate the particular social relations that we celebrate. These relations remain, however, bourgeois in concept, however much they may use the “socialist” vocabulary of equality and democracy. For are not equality and democracy, as we define these terms, quintessentially bourgeois conceptions, as I

have just argued against Coser? We can *hope* they will be compatible with socialism, as they are (in part) with highly developed welfare capitalism, but we cannot deny their bourgeois identity—to repeat, *as we define them*.

Bogdan Denitch’s comment interests me because he goes the furthest in specifying the nature of an institutional structure that is not capitalist and that might admit the kinds of freedoms that we bourgeois-thinking self-styled socialists would like to see preserved. I have always felt it was a great pity that associationist socialism had to have its first trial in a country so burdened with history as Yugoslavia. I would agree with Denitch that this is a road many of us would like to see socialism follow, although whether that will be a historical possibility is difficult to say. □

---

BOOKS

(continued from page 288)

comparatively good record on human rights issues is incontestable. But this may be explained not by the legal and social patterns both books describe but by the impact of our Judeo-Christian heritage, notably the widespread belief in God-given rights to which it has given rise, and its religious conceptions of the unassailable human soul.

Even if the practice of rights forms a secular pattern in democratic states, it is still not certain that the treatment of rights differs significantly from that of other well-established social policies, e.g., the graduated income tax. Majority rule, it can be argued, requires procedures that entail discussion, a respect for minorities, and a weighing of individual and social needs quite similar to the procedures necessary for any operational defense of rights. Whether approached as a *prima facie* good in terms of Flathman’s liberal principle, or simply argued for as wise social policy, the stringent protection of rights depends critically upon the way in which conflicts about rights are resolved and upon the manner in which enforcement mechanisms are brought into play. Most majority-rule systems, with or without a practice of rights, will probably respect civil liberties (“the

great rights”) because of the necessary requirements of a rational social contract.

Neither of these books, indeed, successfully drives from the field those who seek to establish a good society solely on the basis of people’s unfettered wills, and not on some external and “objectively” right standard. Those positivists and utilitarians who believe the question of human rights, as all political questions, involves claims in competition with other claims, to be resolved by agreement, still have what appears to be the strongest arguments. If rights are more inviolable than other prerogatives, privileges, or freedoms, that is only because in some communities people have agreed to treat them that way, perhaps only for the moment, and as a matter of social policy, not necessarily as a fundamental moral tenet. Consequently, rights are not sacrosanct. They do not fall outside the scope of legitimate social agreement and hence of restraints. No certainty about their fate in democracies can be vouchsafed, for we have nothing to depend on besides fallible human judgment. This should make us modest, but not necessarily afraid—for rights or for any other aspect of human welfare. □