

SOCIALISM

My socialism

I am a socialist. I have been a member of the British Labour Party and the Transport and General Workers' Union all my working life. I stood for Parliament as a Labour Party candidate in 1997, I worked pro bono for a number of Labour Parliamentarians between 1992 and 1997 while in opposition, and remain a loyal member of the Party. A loyal member of the Party; but not always a loyal believer in everything that has been done by the Labour government since 1997. That, I think, makes me fairly typical of the party membership.

This section is a little more personal than the other discussions on this site. In effect, it has more to do with “my socialism” than a discussion of socialism in the abstract.

I was won over to socialism primarily by reading Marx when at school, and to leftism in general by reading too much Sartre and Camus at the same time. For me, ideology and belief come first. Despite what people used to say when I was younger, I have not drifted to the right as I have got older. If anything I have moved more determinedly to the left. I am pleased that my early beliefs remain, broadly speaking, my beliefs now. This website, I suppose, is an important part of helping me to work through what I think and believe about a large number of issues and how they fit together into a system.

The problem of “I” and “we”

The central intellectual problem is how we can think of the individual inter-acting with society: how do “I” inter-act with “us”. The European left has, it seems to me, moved over the last three or four decades away from a confident affection for state-organised communism into a form of leftist libertarianism. The reason for this was the successive failure of left-wing parties in Europe to win and to hold electoral mandates after the second world war for sufficiently long to effect the sort of radical social change which communism would have required.

A shift in leftist thought from the State towards the protection of human rights

In consequence, leftist thought and action came to focus ever more on the protection of human rights: in effect, if there could not be a proletarian revolution nor long-term government by even social democratic parties, then a means had to be found to protect individuals from the challenges of right-wing political administrations. The Cold War of course was central in the organisation of politics during this period – bolstering the voting behaviour of a quiescent electorate through fear of nuclear annihilation while also beguiling it with the promise of capitalist wealth and prosperity. It was only the immediate wake of the 1939-45 war that European administrations put together their welfare states as part of their post-war rebuilding programmes: a good example of catastrophe causing an incursion of common sense into the country. A little like Rawls and Habermas contributing to social contract theory, this unique period in history allowed a new political settlement for a brief period.

So, we are left with a left-wing which contains within it a large number of people who drifted away from fully-fledged belief either in anarchy or in collectivism but into a territory of belief in the protection of the individual. Much criticism is levelled at those on the left who continued to support the policies of the Soviet Union which were inimical to individual freedom: they did so because of a personal commitment to state socialism. This is the criticism levelled at Sartre and others in France, for example, that they continued to support the policies of the Soviet Union in spite of ever more information about the gulags leaking out into the public domain. (By-the-by, as I write it should be remembered that it's the world's capitalist superpower which is currently interning people in Guantanamo Bay without charge or trial.) The better approach would have been to condemn such unacceptable practices as those carried on in the USSR and to emphasise a different form of state socialism. The crisis of confidence in an oppressive USSR and fear of the influence of the market capitalism of the USA meant that natural fellow travellers with the left sought refuge in human rights.

The problem with human rights is that they prioritise atomisation of individuals – that is, they make us think of people as being autonomous individuals separated off from one another. Now, this is a good thing if each individual has her rights protected equally well but it is not such a good thing if it makes social solidarity impossible.

Solidarity: individual protection within social goals

So, the answer in the abstract is a form of socialism which ensures social solidarity – through the welfare state, through a measure of equality of access to society's goods, and so on – whilst also ensuring that the rights of individuals are protected and not sacrificed to a process of seeking the greatest good for the greatest number. Aneurin Bevan pointed out in *In Place of Fear* our affection for the notion of the greatest good for the greatest number must never allow us to be blind to the individual suffering of many.

This is the central debate, as I said before, in identifying how we ensure the sanctity of “I” while ensuring that we promote the greatest possible happiness and security for “us”. That is, in what circumstances should I be concerned solely to look after myself (or myself and my immediate family) and in what circumstances should I be concerned with a broader social justice affecting society more broadly (including people I do not know and will never know personally).

For Marxists too often this debate devolves immediately to economics. (Although see the discussion of Marxist ethics elsewhere on this site.) For Blair, for example, the answer has been to introduce the market to his diluted brand of socialism and to talk of “an age of prosperity”. There is too much concern with money and the amassing of personal wealth in this – with the result that we have missed the important ethical imperative to pay taxes and to contribute to common weal – and too little concern with more important values, the sort of values which really hold societies together.

Perception and socialism

So, where are we? My socialism, as opposed to being merely a cuddly affection for human rights, is based on the idea that our principal obligations are moral obligations to other people. Whereas our perception of the world is from the inside of our own heads – so that it is easy to think of the world solely in terms of our own survival and our own desires – it is important to see that our perception is located in a world full of other people. Significantly, being located in the world means that from the moment we are born the world and all of the people in it have been there before us: we land in an already existing world. Once we arrive we are entirely dependent on other people – we take language from those other people, we are weaned by those other people, we develop as people in reaction to other people. So, my socialism is built of this necessary connection of individuals into society: see Nobeit Elias in *The Society of Individuals*.

Society as grass

The metaphor which works best for me in this context is that of grass. Imagine a lawn. Before you is a solid green expanse. It is easy to think of societies as being structured in the same way: a solid mass of people which is impenetrable to the eye at first glance. However, once you start to look more closely there are individuals and groups making up a society in the same way that the individual grass plants mesh together into the apparition that is the lawn. Individual grass plants send up many shoots of green. The comparator here for me is with the division of individual human beings into family groups, work groups and other social groups. It is tempting for those on the right in politics to think of people as being separate one from another and therefore as needing individual protection and being permitted to be greedy for themselves. My view is that it is better to think of individuals as having roots in groups just like the grass plant: each blade of grass is inextricably a part of the bundle: its roots are in common with other blades of grass in that single plant.

If we stand back it is difficult to see the individual plants and therefore see only a lawn: just as when we stand back from individual people we start to see only a society or large community-based clumps of the population. But the individual grass plants are not separate from other grass plants. If you have ever attempted to dig up turf you will have realised why grass is such a successful form of plant life: the various grass plants knit their roots together in the topsoil so that they form a strong unit bedded into the ground. In this way, societies are formed of strong unseen bonds which knit those plants together so as to give the impression of cohesive lawn when seen from a distance. This is the best way of understanding society: while individuals and small groups (whether families or larger communities) do need to concern themselves with their own individual welfare, the entire lawn is knitted together in the same way and requires the same nutrients and inputs to survive and flourish.

Common and individual purpose

The purpose of a society is to draw individuals together so that each person and each group can pursue their own goals while working in common with everyone else to pursue general social goals. This is not simply on the basis of enlightened self-interest – whereby we do things together out of fear of somebody or something else – but rather on the basis

of that compassion, altruism and instinctive commonality which is a necessary part of being human. And so out of our own free will we help other people, we participate in a social life with other people, and we refrain from causing other people in general terms harm. In Kant's terms, because we act through our own free will at this stage, then we are acting morally: it is a moral choice to act for good of other people and not simply for ourselves.

Beyond greed and envy

In a tediously trite media culture it is tempting to think of all of the people in our society as being greedy and selfish at all times. But it is precisely because that we always notice in our daily lives when a person is acting unreasonably, selfishly or unacceptably that we can observe how rare such behaviour is when compared to the many millions of people the weft and warp of whose life is necessarily bound up with being kind or useful: whether as home carers, or employees in the health service, or teachers in schools. For most of us, our lives are bound up with doing acts which help other people. Those who do nothing are the exception.

The roots of socialism in our moral obligations one to another, and in our innate goodness

So, for me, the communal inter-action of human beings is the first requirement and therefore the first instinct; this is a moral obligation to other people. That's where my socialism comes from.

Because if we are dependent upon one another, then the most sensible form of political organisation is one which both provides equal respect for each person's contribution to that society and which also demands on a moral basis that each person make an equal contribution. Equality does not require measurement in this sense nor does it require uniformity. Rather, it requires essentially political decisions as what forms of contribution are good (almost everything) and which are not (criminal or anti-social behaviour). I will return to those political debates later.

At the most abstract level though socialism must free itself from the idea that it will impose uniformity and so smother individuality: the argument is always made that no-one will go the extra yard to develop anything unless they stand to gain personally from it. This argument is, of course, nonsense. People commit to their own lives every day and the smothering argument assumes that we are only interested in the work of entrepreneurs and wealth-generating individuals. Most people work on their own talents and their own interests for its own reward. But a socialist system can enable this to happen anyway by focusing on an equality of access to social goods rather than on simply imposing an equality of outcome on individuals.

Equality of access

Equality of access here is akin to equality of opportunity but it slightly more radical and a little more honest: equality of opportunity requires that you draw a line at some point to

indicate the point at which you are going to stop propping up people's opportunities; whereas equality of access prioritises freedom to select one's own path by making those choices free of obstructions throughout life (such as poverty, lack of training, lack of healthcare and so forth) in such a way that the outcomes will be more equal than is possible in any other way.

Equality of access can permit freedom as part of a project of individualisation. Importantly it will also generate a greater sense of security which is essential in the process of making freedom possible: it is not possible for everyone to be entirely free because that level of complete anarchy would make most people insecure about their own welfare and the welfare of their immediate group. Equality of access to identified social goods makes freedom possible. It is the best of both worlds.

Of course the provision of equality is usually the provision of freedom to those who were previously disadvantaged. If I belong to a social class which is disadvantaged because of the denial of some access to a social good, then if I am made equal with those more advantaged than myself by virtue of being given some freedom which previously I did not have, then I am made free by virtue of being made equal. Of course, it would be possible to make people equal by dint of denying them a freedom which previously they had. For those on the top of the heap equality therefore seems a pernicious thing; whereas for those at the bottom equality will tend to seem liberating.

Marxism

Marxism has gone through so many phases and re-treads involving ideas such as historical materialism – the Hegel-influenced belief in the inevitability of the proletarian revolution – and scientific Marxism – so beloved of Louis Althusser. What Marxism leaves us with, however, is a means of thinking about the world which identifies power in the hands of those with the means of production and of understanding the alienation of individual members of society. There is also the important development made by Antonio Gramsci in relation to the development of an understanding of capitalist hegemony and its displacement by means of ideology and culture to turn the hegemony in favour of the revolutionary classes: ideology.

My interest, as the preceding and scandalously brief summary suggests, is with the progress made in the social sciences by means of the *technique* of understanding social power relations and place of ideology in a media-infused society in leading political action without the need for violent action.

This page will be added to in subsequent editions.