

What Future for Socialism/ Communism?

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Last century, perhaps until Thatcher's era and the collapse of the Soviet bloc, socialism/communism was widely understood as *the* alternative to capitalism. Now socialism/communism is popularly regarded as having been tried and failed, as history not futurity. The 'American Dream' is supposed to be a (multicultural) classless society, so why look ahead to a time when 'class society [will be] finally abolished'¹? An aging set of diehards try to keep socialist ideas going, for academic interest more than to engage in the political process, but younger generations of radicals are more engaged with alternative alternatives to capitalism:

- the merely 'anti-' movements and the World Social Forum with its mass international gatherings;
- the lifestylers, dropouts and sideliners, some of whom – as in the permaculture movement and the ecovillage network – are organised and have agreed goals, methodologies and ideologies, and – to the extent that they are 'political' – lean towards anarchism and social ecology rather than to socialism/communism; and
- lastly, as ever, there are lobby groups, reformers/reformists, and charities, lately grown like Topsy into a major sector of society, with NGOs and big campaigns fronted by A-List celebrities, bankrolled by billionaire philanthropists and by every shape and size of Fund and Trust. World-changing and do-goodery is an industry in the twenty-first century. No wonder socialism/communism is history.

Very occasionally, a spark of interest in socialist ideas in the mind of a young student flames into a passion. For a while he (usually) will raid the shelves of second-hand marxist literature, and seek enlightenment from old comrades holding forth in a pub or bookshop back room. There is evidently a romantic, wacky appeal in *Reds* and all that. And there is something else: a feeling, an urge, a desperation, a sense that all is not well, there has to be another way, and maybe we took the wrong road all those years ago. Sadly, though, the old comrades don't have the answers, and the young enthusiast drifts off, perhaps to 'Make Poverty History' – or down some other road paved with good intentions.

What then do we have to offer, and what must we do – those of us who believe in socialism/communism – to get revolution back on the world agenda? In recent years we have stuck to the prediction/prescription whereby the class struggle will be resolved by the overthrow of the global class of capitalists by the global working class, to bring about a society where each person contributes to the common wealth according to his or her ability, and takes from it according to his or her self-determined needs. This desirable outcome is supposedly held back only by the global working class not realising its commonality of interest and potentially supreme power, so the job of socialists is to inform and educate the working class, and engender solidarity. One reason we fail in this role is our tendency to fall into factions espousing variations of the socialist case, so efforts are made towards solidarity through forming alliances. In Britain in recent years this manifested as the 'Socialist Alliance', but that fell apart again because of disagreements between one much larger group – the Socialist Workers Party – and the others (together making up some 46% of the whole) who were always out-voted. (Like mainstream society, socialists fetishise 'democracy' as 'the majority of those who get to vote get to decide'). What is left today after that fiasco is a patchily active Party called 'Respect' (led by the SWP and fronted by George Galloway, who is proudly paraded as Respect's first Member of Parliament) and a smattering of disgruntled individual socialists and tiny leftie groups, some still hoping to re-launch the Socialist Alliance in the autumn of 2005.

Is forming alliances not the way then? Will individual socialist parties only attract support and votes if fronted by a charismatic leader? Do the compromises that have to be made on procedure or policy make this strategy a waste of time?

In March 2005, a ‘Socialist Unity Conference’ was held on behalf of the 46% against the decision to close the SA in favour of Respect. The Report of the event² conveys its sponsors’ scrupulously ‘democratic’ conference conduct, and outlines their policy under the headings ‘Socialism’, ‘Republicanism’, ‘Internationalism’ and ‘Environmentalism’. The Manifesto of the original Socialist Alliance is still available on an obsolete web site³, and incorporates a whole wish list full of good intentions, impossible to achieve (or render obsolete) ahead of fundamental revolution. An alliance of socialists may perhaps be excused for compiling so ‘reformist’ a document on the grounds that it was put together for SA candidates standing in local government elections. Galloway’s Respect Party seems to have inherited much of the same material about ending the occupation of Iraq and raising the minimum wage etc.⁴, and has a similar excuse. Their Constitution says this:

Our overall aim is to help create a socially just and ecologically sustainable society[, a] society in which social justice is defined as incorporating: the organisation of society in the most open, participative, and accountable way practicable based on common ownership and democratic control; the maximum freedom for the individual commensurate with the freedom of others; the fight against, and ultimate abolition of, racism, sexism and all forms of discrimination on grounds of religion, disability, age or sexual identity; the ultimate abolition of all forms of economic exploitation and social oppression; the promotion of peace and a system of justice which gives defence from tyranny, prejudice and the abuse of power; [and] the promotion of social, economic and cultural structures which are ecologically sustainable and supportive to global ecosystems.⁵

That passage can be read as a socialist agenda, but Respect literature is predominantly reformist, and membership is open to anyone generally sympathetic to the Party’s aims. It must be uncertain how long the patchy support Respect enjoys will last, especially if George Galloway moves on or its special appeal to Asian communities wanes.

What can socialists/ communists learn from this failed attempt at alliance building? How can we avoid a similar debacle in future? First of all, clearly, we need to do some work on what makes genuine participatory democracy.⁶ Secondly, we must avoid the trap of trying to exploit upsurges of popular protest. The current ‘Make Poverty History’ campaign is such a trap waiting for us to fall into. One World-in-Commoner returned from the big G8 demo in Edinburgh with this message: ‘It’s easy to dismiss the motives and politics of the vast majority of marchers as reformist, pro-fair-trade etc. but it was encouraging to see so many from diverse groups and nations who oppose poverty and want something done about it. I think *any movement towards socialism/communism will need to embrace inclusiveness and diversity while maintaining a principled opposition against reformism.*’⁷ (My italics) But this is teetering on the brink of another bandwagon ‘trap’ like the one Respect fell into. A group determined on turning the G8 demo into a ‘Carnival for Full Enjoyment’ had this to say: ‘Since the G8 last met in the UK in 1998, we’ve seen more social cuts, privatisation and compulsory work schemes in Europe and beyond. This is part of a continuing enclosure of resources and means of living — such as water, land and housing — around the world. Now the G8 bosses meeting in Gleneagles claim to address concerns about climate chaos and world poverty. But they really aim to strengthen the system at the root of these conditions, and to find more efficient ways of managing, exploiting and enclosing us. We can only stop it by abolishing a profit-based economy; by dismantling the states and borders that divide us.’⁸ With that kind of local-to-global

insight, socialism/ communism can be reclaimed as *the* alternative to capitalism, but with a different – and much more radical – agenda from the old marxist prediction/prescription.

The new agenda involves ‘unlearning our learning’⁹. Rather than constantly looking back to marxist literature that is from fifty to over one hundred and fifty years old, we must be prepared to look ahead, stop being coy about what a socialist future would be like, and make alliances with people who are sidelining capitalism now. We should give up on the notion that capitalism is a necessary stage in a process leading to a socialist society. In fact human survival is uncertain due to over-exploitation of the land we depend on for everything – a crisis that has crept up on us due to alienation from the land from long before the capitalist era. Land degradation is a huge subject and I will not attempt even to define it here, but there are texts available.¹⁰ It is the issue of climate change which is the hot topic at the G8, and the Editorial in the latest issue of *Permaculture Magazine* included this grim summary:

The British Antarctic Survey reports that the West Antarctic icesheet is melting. If it collapses the sea levels could rise more than 16 feet. Both London and Bangladesh will be drowned. Meanwhile, American scientists now predict that the likelihood of the Gulf Stream ‘pump’ switching off due to excessive meltwater in the Arctic is greater than 50%. And the glaciers in the Himalayas that ensure the annual flow for the river systems of the Indian subcontinent and SE Asia are retreating. Without the irrigation they provide, 1 billion people will be displaced. Then there are the matters of CO₂ dissolving in the oceans, acidifying the seas and making them virtually uninhabitable; a 1°C rise in temperature making tropical rainforests unviable; and a 1-2°C rise making trout disappear from the Rockies. Even if we stopped all emissions now there is still likely to be a 0.6°C rise because the effects of climate change happen over decades, not years. The grimmest prediction is that there will be a 90% die off of the global human population.¹¹

Capitalism – for reasons well understood by socialists – will not be deterred by concerns about pollution. However, it may have to respond to the twin concern of ‘Oil Peak’, and in his book on this¹², Matt Savinar points to the US ‘descent into fascism’, and says the US government will ‘go to war to get oil and kill anyone who gets in the way.’ That sounds bad enough, but Savinar goes on to explore possible alternatives to oil and says why they cannot stem off the inevitable:

... even ‘free energy’ – were it a reality – would not change the fundamental issue that humans are up against: the earth has a carrying capacity, and we have used up the super-abundant resource, oil, over the last 150 years to systematically deplete virtually every other resource: top soil, fresh water, forests, biodiversity and minerals. This is why we will not just be quietly slipping back to the 1700s but will be more likely to go straight back to the Stone Age. For example, pre-industrial societies mined copper from ores with 30-50% metal. Nowadays, a typical copper mine averages less than 0.8% copper which can only be extracted using large amounts of energy. No oil, no copper and no anything else that we take for granted in the modern world.¹³

Twenty years ago one could argue that climate change – then called the Greenhouse Effect – could be averted by addressing land degradation. Land regenerated after millennia of over-exploitation to feed urban populations¹⁴ and planted with trees, would thrive on the newly released carbon dioxide. I spent the 1980s arguing against the ‘pollution’ bias in the British environmental movement: toxic waste, nuclear waste, acid rain, CFCs etc., with only two concerns relating to land use: saving the tropical forests and conserving the pretty bits of the British countryside. At that time, even environmentalists were alienated from the land and oblivious to land use concerns. Today there is more awareness, particularly of the desirability of buying local food, not just because it is more

nutritious, but also to support local growers and save 'food miles' and packaging. The idea of planting trees to mop up CO₂ is still current¹⁵, but few people believe that is the solution to climate change, and of course the oil peak scenario must mean that the remaining oil should be conserved for chemical products, not burned.

I mentioned earlier the need for socialists/ communists to 'unlearn our learning', which requires an honest appraisal of the precious marxist canon, and being prepared to discard what is obsolete. For instance, socialism was not conceived by Marx as a rescue package for a dying and depleted planet; his enthusiastic predictions depended on the 'massive ... productive forces' achieved under capitalism, whose social relations would become fetters, so that – following the pattern of earlier transitions – socialism would burst forth¹⁶. Marxists have seen social change as a linear progression:

Capitalism has not existed for all time but is the outcome of a process of social evolution. Starting with primitive communism in which property was held in common, followed in turn by the kind of society known in Greece and Rome, based on production by chattel slave labour, and by Feudal society out of which capitalism grew. In each of the societies after primitive communism there has been exploitation of one class by another but the form of exploitation has changed. The feudal serf was not 'owned' as the chattel slave had been, but he was tied to the land of the manorial lord and under obligation to give unpaid labour on the lord's land while free to maintain himself by his labour on land under his control. ... The evolution of property society reaches its limit with the advent of capitalism. The establishment of Socialism and with it the end of exploitation is the beginning of a new era in the history of mankind. The working class will therefore be the last exploited class to achieve its emancipation.¹⁷

This simplistic European Marxist prediction/prescription results in a bizarre collusion between socialists/ communists and the capitalist system they deplore, because capitalism is accepted as a necessary stage on the way to a socialist society. So whilst we dismiss the aims of Make Poverty History as reformist, we have no radical position to take against the G8 development project in Africa.

The aims of Make Poverty History are: 'trade justice, debt cancellation, and more and better aid for the world's poorest countries'.¹⁸ 'Trade justice' is seen as the primary aim, and the most demanding and contentious. It is based on the premise that the people of Africa are poor because their countries are 'underdeveloped', and all will be well if the rich countries concede to them fair trade in their cash crops, raw materials and manufactures. Bob Geldof has been fronting a TV programme on Africa, and (not being a regular viewer) I happened on the first of these in which he showed a part of Africa – I think in Tanzania – where people were living sustainably and happily in small hamlets – tiny social groups – in amongst their food-growing gardens. But these people are being resettled because their old land is being expropriated for cash crops. Geldof interviewed one of the recently resettled people, who said they couldn't get on harmoniously in the new large communities and the poorer patches of land they have been given are some distance from the settlement and in the rainy season cannot be reached due to mud.¹⁹ Intrigued by this confirmation of my long-held antipathy to so-called development, I searched on the web for something more authoritative, and found Chapter 8 of an e-text of *African Agriculture: The Critical Choices*.²⁰ The author, Henry Mapolu, describes the same process as in the Geldof programme taking place from the colonial period to the 1980s. Mapolu relates how the people resist resettlement and cash cropping, and resume subsistence farming in the old way, which may be why the process of resettlement is never complete and still goes on.

Enforced resettlement – often described in and labelled with different terms – has been a crucial aspect of human history, but it has happened patchily, sporadically and out of sight. The more modern history books and various political texts make occasional references to complex rural systems disrupted despite resistance. A thousand years ago, in the Anglo-Saxon period, much of Britain was a patchwork of hamlets with their own gardens, open-field strips and pastures²¹, before the Norman conquest brought in feudalism, and later there were further disruptions with the Enclosures and Clearances. In 1853 Marx writes of an ‘Indian society [with] no history ... but the history of successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society.’²² These rulers operated hands-off systems of exploitation management whereby they creamed off surpluses but left the ‘fabric of traditional rural independence alone’, a practice which the British disrupted by instituting formal deeds to land.²³ In his article, Marx writes of England’s ‘double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerative—the annihilation of the old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.’ Marx’s conclusion is worth quoting in full:

The devastating effects of English industry, when contemplated with regard to India, a country as vast as Europe, and containing 150 millions of acres, are palpable and confounding. But we must not forget that they are only the organic results of the whole system of production as it is now constituted. That production rests on the supreme rule of capital. The centralization of capital is essential to the existence of capital as an independent power. The destructive influence of that centralization upon the markets of the world does but reveal, in the most gigantic dimensions, the inherent organic laws of political economy now at work in every civilized town. The bourgeois period of history has to create the material basis of the new world—on the one hand the universal intercourse founded upon the mutual dependency of mankind, and the means of that intercourse; on the other hand the development of the productive powers of man and the transformation of material production into a scientific domination of natural agencies. Bourgeois industry and commerce create these material conditions of a new world in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth. When a great social revolution shall have mastered the results of the bourgeois epoch, the market of the world and the modern powers of production, and subjected them to the common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar but from the skulls of the slain.²⁴

That process is taking a long time to work its way through the world, partly due to resistance to resettlement, but also due to former colonies being deliberately underdeveloped. India today is certainly becoming more urban²⁵, but 70% still live in rural villages, 90% of which have a population of less than 2000, into which business is managing to make some inroads.²⁶ Gramsci’s ‘Theory of Subordination and Hegemony’ shows that he followed Marx in seeing it as necessary for the peasant societies of Southern Italy to be disrupted and dislocated, through war if necessary, in order to bring them into solidarity with the working class of the industrialised North²⁷. But wresting the land from the peasants, and the alienation from the land of urban populations (in Britain’s so-called villages and towns, as well as in cities proper), has allowed land degradation worldwide to spread and worsen largely unobserved and ignored except by specialists. And land degradation – exacerbated by climate change and oil peak – renders capitalism unsustainable and a new world founded on its achievements an impossible dream.

My aim in this article has been to begin to wean socialists/ communists off the old Marxist prediction/prescription, in order that we may again become *the* alternative to capitalism. Questioning the prediction/prescription is the first stage – and I have suggested that this requires that we ‘unlearn our learning’. Next I have suggested that we align ourselves to other radical world

changers, rather than get on populist bandwagons or make reformist compromises that perpetuate the collusion with capitalism that the social evolution model got us into. The permaculture movement and the global ecovillages network, in particular, are actually more radical than socialists/ communists because they are addressing the most serious threat to life on earth: land degradation,²⁸ and they are putting their principles, theory and expertise into practice all around the world. A little exploration of how far these initiatives have progressed will show that they need to get political if the land use revolution is to move fast enough to avert the looming crisis. And there will come a time when their progress is perceived as threatening to capitalist vested interests, and campaigning for mass support will be essential. Socialists/ communists have nothing to lose but our obsolete theory. We have a world to win.

¹ *Historical Materialism* (Socialist Party of Great Britain pamphlet, 1975), p.1

² http://www.democracyplatform.org.uk/SOCIALIST_UNITY_CONF_REPORT_rtf.doc

³ http://socialistalliance.org/SAarchive/resources/elections/SAManifesto_27_03_4.html [accessed 1 July 2005]

⁴ <http://www.respectcoalition.org/index.php?sec=39> [accessed 1 July 2005]

⁵ <http://www.respectcoalition.org/index.php?ite=418> [accessed 1 July 2006]

⁶ <http://esf2004.net/en/tiki-index.php?page=LdsNotesDemocracies> [accessed 5 July 2005]

⁷ Message from JP to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/worldincommon/>, 4 July 2005

⁸ <http://www.nodeal.org.uk/> [accesses 5 July 2005]

⁹ 'An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak', *boundary 2*, Vol.20, No.2 (Summer 1993), 24-50 (p.24)

¹⁰ Recommended books on land degradation: Vernon Gill Carter and Tom Dale, *Topsoil and Civilization* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), Tim Flannery, *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Land and People* (Sydney: Reed New Holland, 1997), Johan Goudsblom, *Fire and Civilisation* (London: Penguin, 1994), Andrew Goudie, *The Human Impact on the Natural Environment: Third Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), Piers Blaikie and Harold Brookfield, *Land Degradation and Society* (London: Methuen, 1987), Piers Blaikie, *The Political Economy of Soil Erosion in Developing Countries* (Harlow, Essex: Longman Scientific and Technical, 1987), John A. Dixon, David E. James and Paul B. Sherman, *The Economics of Dryland Management* (London: Earthscan, 1989), Simmons, I G, *Changing the Face of the Earth*, (Oxford:Blackwell, 1989) Plus there is plenty of information on land degradation worldwide on the internet, one recent *Google* came up with:

<http://www.growbiointensive.org/biointensive/soil.html>

http://www.uea.ac.uk/dev/faculty/stocking/ldd_paper.pdf

http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/media_info/press_kit/fact7_agriculture.pdf

and on unsustainability <http://www.context.org/ICLIB/IC19/Brown.htm> [accessed 3 July 2005]

¹¹ Maddy Harland, 'Editorial', *Permaculture Magazine*, Issue No.44 (East Meon, Hampshire: Permanent Publications, 2005), p.2, attributed to Michael McCarthy, *Independent* on 'IPCC'.

¹² *THE OIL AGE IS OVER: What To Expect When The World Runs Out Of Cheap Oil 2005-2050*, by Matt Savinar, J.D. Morris Publishing, 2004. 216 x 140mm, 200pp. US\$33.95 (inc. p&p to UK) (UK£17.50 inc. p&p approx.) Available from: www.lifeaftertheoilcrash.net

¹³ Graham Strouts, in 'Reviews', *Permaculture Magazine*, Issue No.43 (East Meon, Hampshire: Permanent Publications, 2005), p.56

¹⁴ The book which first showed me that organic farming would not solve all the problems associated with post-WWII industrial agriculture was: Vernon Gill Carter and Tom Dale, *Topsoil and Civilization* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974)

¹⁵ According to this web site: <http://www.americanforests.org/resources/ccc/>, you have to plant one new tree per 300 kg of CO₂, assuming the tree absorbs 0.9 tons in 40 years.

¹⁶ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. by Samuel Moore in 1888 from orig. text of 1848 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), [pp.52-60]

¹⁷ The Socialist Party of Great Britain, *Object and Declaration of Principles: Socialist Principles Explained* (London: SPGB, 1975), p.16

¹⁸ <http://www.makepovertyhistory.org/docs/demoguide.pdf> [accessed 4 July 2005]

¹⁹ http://www.bbc.co.uk/africalives/features/geldof_episodes.shtml [accessed 4 July 2005]

²⁰ The United Nations University/Third World Forum, Studies In African Political Economy, *African Agriculture: The Critical Choices*, Ed. by Hamid Ait Amara and Bernard Founou-Tchuigoua, with a Preface by Samir Amin, (London: Zed Books, 1990) <http://www.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/uu28ae/uu28ae00.htm#Contents> '8. Tanzania: Imperialism, the state and the peasantry'

<http://www.unu.edu/unupress/unupbooks/uu28ae/uu28ae0h.htm#8.%20tanzania:%20imperialism,%20the%20state%20and%20the%20peasantry> [accessed 4 July 2005]

²¹ H.R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (harlow, Essex, Longman, 1994), pp.19ff.

Common Voice Issue 3 Summer 2005. www.cvoice.org

²² Karl Marx, 'The Future Results of British Rule in India' in *KarlMarx: Selected Writings*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p.332-3 [orig. publ. in *New York Daily Tribune*, 1853]

²³ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 7th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp.196-7

²⁴ Marx, pp.332-6

²⁵ <http://www.indianngos.com/issue/cities&urban/statistics/> http://infochangeindia.org/urban_india_01.jsp [accessed 3 July 2005]

²⁶ <http://www.rediff.com/money/2005/jun/29spec.htm> [accessed 3 July 2005]

²⁷ Nadia Urbatini, 'From the Periphery of Modernity: Antonio Gramsci's Theory of Subordination and Hegemony', *Political Theory*, Vol.26, No.3 (June 1998) <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0090-5917%28199806%2926%3A3%3C370%3AFTPOMA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-O> [accessed 2 March 2005]

²⁸ See www.permaculture.org.uk, www.permaculture.co.uk, www.des4rev.org.uk/mollisondes4rev.htm, www.des4rev.org.uk/bookchinsociety.htm, <http://gen.ecovillage.org>, <http://www.auroville.org/>, <http://www.permacultura.org/>, www.des4rev.org.uk