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by MATEO PIMENTEL

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## *Socialism and the Ballot*

In recent elections, it seems American voters have had little choice but to elect candidates they perceive as being “on their side,” or perhaps as being “better than the other guy.” Since the enfranchisement of women and Black Americans in the course of the last century, voter participation has been too easily circumscribed by powerful elements, and often approached as if little more than a championship football game. Damage control is simple enough when just two teams play, when only two rule books vie for predictable outcomes, and when always, always, the rich get richer in the end, win who may. Certainly, to an appreciable extent, voters themselves have co-produced this system. Albeit, this problem is nothing new to anarchists who have long pointed out that democracy’s fundamental flaw is that it pivots on processes, not results.

Now, in a country where monopoly pretends to validate the total success of financial as much as political ventures, there may be a telling irony to the current American political moment, a time in which a protracted battle for supremacy yet rages between the major political parties and underscores, rather than snuffs, radical sentiments and the concomitant trends in voting behavior that bespeak them. For many voters today, these elections indicate a departure from what was not so long ago perceived as “politics as usual.” Obama’s election marked a kind of departure from the Bush-Gore election moment, and now, right-wing populism and white nationalism once again leave their substanceless but de-democratizing watermark on the pages of American political history being underwritten by Donald Trump, a shameless clown.

With this year's midterms, voters yet witness what has been seeping through the political cracks all along. Rather than being eclipsed by the usual two-party political "football rivalry," and now a peculiarly self-serving presidency, socialist ideas are being floated with a fresh degree of regularity, and very much at the grass-roots level. Some of this year's candidates, notably women and members of minority and marginalized groups, folks who propound radical ideas to realize necessary dreams, seek to secure historically off-limits establishment positions. One question is why, now, in this utmost neoliberal moment, do socialist ideas lure voters away from either ideology of the dominant, entrenched camps in support of once unthinkable political victories?

The economists who have published the recent World Inequality Report 2018 offer several income-based observations that elucidate a potential, if partial, answer to this question. For example, Piketty and colleagues state:

"Until recently, most available long-run series on inequality focused on top-income shares. ...[W]e present new findings on how the shares going to the lowest groups of populations have evolved. ...[B]ottom-income shares have declined significantly in many countries. In particular, we document a dramatic collapse of the bottom 50% income share in the United States since 1980 but not in other advanced economies, again suggesting that policies play a key role."

Anyone aware of the neoliberal turn ushered in under Reagan and Thatcher could not mistake the year 1980: it all but marks the beginning of the decimation of bottom income shares that is now under study by mainstream economists, who are sounding the alarm. "The income-inequality trajectory observed in the United States," they write, "is largely due to massive educational inequalities, combined with a tax system that grew less progressive despite a surge in top labor compensation since the 1980s, and in top capital incomes in the 2000s." Indeed, nearly four decades later, neoliberalism's downward pressure on workers, the poor, and the marginalized has squeezed the least powerful to a political point of degeneracy pressure, which a star undergoes before eventual detonation. The squeeze is only tolerable to a point, and consequent change is phenomenal.

Under such pressure, what choice do voters have but to vote for candidates sympathetic to the idea of workers controlling the government, and the government controlling the economy? Such is how Danny Katch describes the encompassing pillars of socialism in his book [Socialism...Seriously: A Brief Guide to Human Liberation](#).

Moreover, voters know that socialism is not a pipedream. Piketty's report possibly provides scientific grounds for steering toward a socialist future. They observe that current

economic inequality is “largely driven by the unequal ownership of capital, which can be either privately or publicly owned,” and, globally, current income inequality is going to increase “even more if all countries follow the high-inequality trajectory followed by the United States between 1980 and 2016.” So, given the chance to change from a life lived under capitalism to something else, something much more humane and equitable, socialism amounts not to a “left turn” in the colloquial sense, but very much a “right” one. But what, exactly, are voters turning away from when they vote at the ballot box? Perhaps unwittingly, Alan Greenspan, appointed Chairman of the Federal Reserve by Reagan in 1987, and serving as chairman until 2006, provides insight into this question in his new book Capitalism in America. Greenspan and coauthor Adrian Wooldridge actually paint a dismal, if mythically American, picture of capitalism, which they claim to be the most democratic, globally.

To them, American capitalism is unlike capitalism elsewhere in the world, where unfortunately it is caught up with “a plutocratic elite” and not of any service to ordinary people. Moreover, they believe American capitalism has allowed some to live financially ascendent lives while the rest, at worst, enjoy the spoils of the individual economic cunning of more successful figures. Yet, these authors also acknowledge some blemishes: “...the mistreatment of the aboriginal peoples and the enslavement of millions of African Americans” was bad but excusable when weighed against all the positives. Furthermore, they claim Americans instinctively surmised that Marx was wrong: workers were not responsible for historical change but the industrious men who pull themselves up by their bootstraps (e.g., Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, and Bill Gates).

Another claim central to their argument is that American capitalism has importantly depended on creative destruction, which in turn relies on better machines and business processes, information, cost reduction, efficient use of inputs, reduced transportation costs, and location. But alas, despite having the secret recipe for it, they admit the upsides to creative destruction is not an immediate given for anyone. And if potentially failing to exist altogether were not the worst of creative destruction, that is to say the very heart of Greenspan’s reduction of American capitalism, the authors cede the fallout manifests two ways: “...the destruction of physical assets as they become surplus to requirements, and the displacement of workers as old jobs are abandoned. To this should be added the problem of uncertainty.”

Naturally, this key economic feature in American capitalism begets winners and losers. Greenspan’s fix for making such a system “truly actuarially sound” is simple: reduce

“benefit levels ... by 25 percent indefinitely into the future, or taxation rates need to be raised”—the latter being a political non-starter, of course.

Yet, history is not inaccessible to the rest of us, and individuals with power similar to Greenspan’s have themselves weighed-in on capitalism from time to time. Nearly a century-and-a-half ago, for instance, John C. Calhoun, asserted “there never has yet existed a wealthy and civilized society in which one portion of the community did not, in point of fact, live on the labor of the other. Broad and general as is this assertion, it is fully borne out by history.” Calhoun further argues “it would not be difficult to trace the various devices by which the wealth of all civilized communities has been so unequally divided, and to show by what means so small a share has been allotted to those by whose labor it was produced, and so large a share given to the non-producing classes.” This flies in the face of Greenspan’s gambit that American capitalism has proven, definitively, that workers are not responsible for historical change.

Prior to Calhoun, even, Andrew Jackson ostensibly bemoaned the rigging of the American government in favor of capitalism and its winners, as well as the inability of American democracy, thoroughly sustained by capitalism, to provide a solution:

“It is to be regretted that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes. Distinctions in society will always exist under every just government. Equality of talents, of education, or of wealth can not be produced by human institutions. In the full enjoyment of the gifts of Heaven and the fruits of superior industry, economy, and virtue, every man is equally entitled to protection by law; but when the laws undertake to add ... distinctions, to grant titles, gratuities, and exclusive privileges, to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society – the farmers, mechanics, and laborers – who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their Government.”

Today, while the three richest individuals in the United States and half the country’s population (i.e., its poorest half) possess the same amount of wealth, and when over four-fifths of the wealth created in the last year flowed only to one percent of all people, globally, it makes intuitive sense that people should be wont to—as anarchist thinker Ivan Illich says—“shake off the illusion that men are born to be slaveholders and that the only thing wrong in the past was that not all men could be equally so.” And so, the present critique of capitalism manifests many places, the ballot box being but one of them.

Voters are questioning crisis, whether economic or social. They question the distribution of wealth, what wealth means, and how it gets created. Fairness is questioned: who gets

what, why, and for what work? Furthermore, voters are questioning “what counts as labor, how it is organized, and what its organization is now demanding from, and doing to, people,” as Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi examine in their book Capitalism: A Conversation in Critical Theory.

The same authors indicate that criticizing capitalism entails equity as well as questions surrounding why so few lives are stable or undergirded by “a sense of wellbeing...” Also, why is there such precarity relative to work? Why must voters living under capitalism continue acquiring multiple jobs with “fewer rights, protections, and benefits,” not to mention increasing instances of crushing debt? Fraser and Jaeggi add:

“Equally fundamental questions surround the deepening stresses on family life... Deep questions arise, too, about the increasingly alarming impacts of our extractive relation to nature... Nor, finally, should we forget political questions, about, for example, the hollowing out of democracy by market forces at two levels: ... the corporate capture of political parties and public institutions at the level of the territorial state; [and] the usurpation of political decision-making power at the transnational level by global finance, a force that is unaccountable to any demos.”

Rightly, these theorists consider all of the above to be “central to what it means to talk about capitalism today.”

Capitalism and critique notwithstanding, conservative thought leaders in America could not be happier to finger Venezuela as suffering from a failed, tag-team combination of Venezuelan socialism and Cuban communism. They say whereas Venezuela was once among the world’s richest countries, socialism is unequivocally to blame for the bankruptcy and misery that Venezuelans currently face. The old self-evident once again truth emerges in their ploy: heterodox approaches to economic policy and political governance breeds dissonance and suffering time and time again. But really, what is the mis-direction being given here? Simply, resist socialism. The American government itself promotes the same, calling on the international community to help in restoring democracy, or capitalism, in Venezuela through economic sanctions and pressure on the Venezuelan people.

Consider the source of the advice that encourages American voters to resist socialism. In America, the government is not controlled by the workers. What is largely possible for voting constituents to achieve, radically speaking, is to an extent determined by what the state is willing to ordain and prescribe. As Alain Badiou notes, “The State is always the finitude of possibility, and the event is its infinitization.” So, voters must necessarily

consider the state also to be preoccupied with what is, or what, for its own sake, ought always to be, impossible. Truly, for for the American state, this is likely imperative to self-preservation in a time of revived interest in socialist ideas.

To the state's liking, what is possible under the present political arrangement in America is: one, a highly susceptible constitutional government; two, an economic system marked by capitalism; three, law for the sake of property; and four, military and police apparatuses. This arrangement frees the state to further discern what possibilities it will engender and espouse going forward, organizing itself accordingly and, thus far, along two party lines. That anything else outside either the will or the activity of the state will be tolerated endures "only to the extent that it is subtracted from the power of the state," as Badiou asserts.

As further evidence of this, French anarchist Jacques Ellul provides a historical observation on "technique" and the state in the mid-twentieth century: "...either it receives from the state that sanction which alone can render it efficacious, or it must remain a mere abstraction, an offer without a taker. But who believes that such a noble edifice can remain an abstraction? There is, in any case, one agency which asks nothing better than to intervene: the state."

In all likelihood, the continued existence of capitalism serves to ensure the dream of socialism be kept alive. And because life becomes increasingly dire for so many while a select few enjoy more and more spoils, it is only reasonable that voters should be acting to materialize some of their dreams by supporting candidates oriented toward socialism. As Ernesto "Che" Guevara once wrote, a revolution is not "an apple that falls when it is ripe." Rather, "You have to make it fall."

Today, a vote outside the political binary that perennially conforms American voters to a selection between two all but inevitable evils has dangerous fissures where radical political seeds have been sown, and by some mainstream politicians! The message? Principally, that another world is possible, no matter how dire the outlook at present, and that voters are precipitating the revolution at the ballot box. But for those who continue vote instep with the "spirit of Socialism," as anarchist writer Rudolf Rocker calls it, that the overarching, albeit nominal, democracy should remain oriented towards processes rather than outcomes is problematic. If the state can know the outcomes or predict them based on the processes in place, or the "sides of the aisle," then the various administrative tendrils of the bureaucratic corpus can ensure a viable existence going forward.

Of course, talking heads rally behind the state and come to its aid. Economists, politicians, pundits, and so on, all decry the recent upwelling in interest about socialism, contending that much of the original momentum of heterodox economics of decades, and even centuries, past is now lost. Despite the jingoism, both radicals and the uninitiated find themselves in good company at present. The thought of carrying on the radical work initiated by predecessors suffices to inspire them. For, the ideas of socialism are often practical as much as moral ones. Hence, Noam Chomsky instructs that “at every stage of history our concern must be to dismantle those forms of authority and oppression that survive from an era when they might have been justified in terms of the need for security or survival or economic development, but that now contribute to—rather than alleviate—material and cultural deficit.” Indeed, it is the reasonable humanist who sides with Enlightenment ideals and continues the age-old assault on the attendant inequality in society through an entire suite of prudent and necessary means.

Certainly, socialism’s detractors would have all voters believe there is no alternative to the dreadful status quo or its companion hierarchies that brace the current socio-political and economic arrangements. Furthermore, to inquire as to the feasibility of alternatives to the status quo is to welcome the usual self-serving response that guards the thing—perhaps as Badiou says of the “red decade,” beginning with the mid-1970s, which “finds its subjective form in a resigned surrender, in a return to customs—including electoral customs—deference towards the capito-parliamentarian or ‘Western’ order, and also the conviction that to want something better is to want something worse.” Or, in other words, to want socialism in America is necessarily to want to live a life under “failures” of economic and political experiments.

Well, what of the world’s dominant incarnation of oligarchic representative democracy? Indeed, it is like what Badiou asserts of the so-called “Communist hypothesis,” precisely that to compare most any alternative to what American capitalism and its government has espoused and engendered at home and abroad is to risk proselytizing about the benefits of subscribing to the “free world” values whose purportedly necessary protection is used as an excuse to further the state’s waging of endless war around the world. This, too, empowers the West to designate as “bad” anything of its choosing.

Reagan knew this well, and thus enjoyed the cultural currency afforded him by giving an incredible platform to the term “Evil Empire.” But this may also be evidence in support of anarchist Murray Bookchin’s assertion, “There is no future for hierarchical society to claim, and for us there are the alternatives only of utopia or social extinction.” In the face

of the current extinction event, which the state has not designated as “bad” enough so as to go to war with it, the sweeping, steady turn towards socialist ideas is precisely a turn away from social extinction and toward something better.

As Katch writes:

“Because we are so used to picturing the masters of both government and economy as narrow centralized powers that rule over us from a handful of buildings, it is hard for us to picture changes in society that go beyond replacing the people in those buildings with others who are hopefully more honest and noble. Socialism wouldn’t just replace those people but the system that centralizes so much power in a few buildings. It would broaden the bases of decision-making to thousands of buildings and public squares and community centers.”

Therefore, so many cast their ballots this year in the hopes of realizing socialist aims: elaborating a system whereby they, the people, “control the government by changing what government means.”