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The Principles of Socialism



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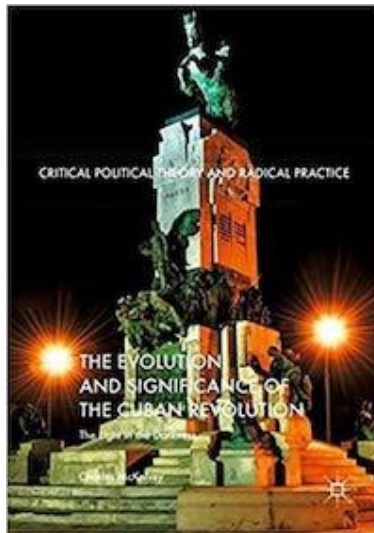
With the emergence on the U.S. political scene of self-proclaimed socialists like Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Rashida Tlaib, and with membership in the Democratic Socialists of America skyrocketing, socialism appears to be making a comeback in the United States. Inasmuch as I was active in the Democratic Socialists of America in the 1980s, and I have lived in Cuba since 2011, I find this to be very good news. However, I am concerned that the word socialism perhaps is being bantered about without a very thorough understanding of its meaning or its history.

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Socialism has been forged in theory and practice by intellectuals and leaders of great historic importance: Marx, Lenin, Mao, Ho, and Fidel, among others. Moreover, socialism has experienced a politically significant revival in Latin America: the Chavist Revolution in Venezuela; the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua; the Movement for Socialism led by Evo Morales in Bolivia; and the Citizen Revolution led by Rafael Correa in Ecuador. In U.S. history, the analyses of James P. Cannon, one of the founders of the Socialist Workers Party; and the African-American movement, especially the speeches and writings of Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, are important for our understanding. I would submit that all who proclaim themselves socialist ought to have at least a basic understanding of these historical and contemporary movements and exceptional leaders. They nourish our reflections concerning the components of a just society and the political dynamics of leading the people toward the construction of a socialist society.

Nearly all of us who proclaim ourselves socialists today want to avoid the historic errors of socialism. Accordingly, we are in agreement that it is not a matter of developing and implementing a blueprint, nor is it a question of developing a



model that would be followed everywhere. We have learned to take more seriously the notion of Marx that the meaning of socialism emerges in practice, and that its theoretical understanding will be different in each particular social, historical, and national context.

However, there are fundamental principles and basic concepts in socialism, to which we must be committed. This implies that we cannot be socialists if we are in a condition of ignorance with respect to the principles and concepts formulated in practice by the great historic and contemporary leaders of the socialist movements.

What are the fundamental principles and concepts of socialism? Taking into account the theoretical reflections and political practices of the socialist revolutions mentioned above, I would suggest eight as a basis for discussion.

(1) The taking of political power. Our goal as socialists in the USA must be the capturing of control of the executive and legislative branches of the federal government, as a necessary first step to structural transformations. In all the socialist movements cited above, although their specific strategies differed, they formed an alternative political party or social movement, outside the political establishment, which sought to take political power. In the USA, the process could include the strategy of taking popular control of the Democratic Party, but not necessarily; the key factor is that there must be a politically intelligent plan for the taking of political power. In addition, there must be constant critical reflection with respect to the norms and regulations of the political process itself, so that alternative institutions for the consolidation of popular political power can be developed in the long run.

(2) In the name of the people. All of the diverse sectors of the people have been present as leaders and participants in the historic socialist revolutions, and therefore, the most politically effective strategy would be to call all the diverse sectors of the people to popular democratic socialist revolution. Here the concept of the 99% that emerged from the Occupy Movement is a good start. One of the historic errors of third parties and social movements of the United States is that they have been overly identified with one sector of the people, be it workers, blacks, women, or ecologists. In the historic socialist revolutions of the world, a vanguard emerged among the people, and its members came from all popular sectors, including male professionals and middle class students from the ethnic majority, who in some cases played a critically important leading role. In calling the people to socialist revolution, the politically intelligent strategy is to call all of the people, without any prejudgment, based on gender, color, or class, concerning one's individual capacity and commitment to contribute to the struggle.

(3) In defense of the nation. The successful socialist revolutions in other lands presented themselves as defenders of the dignity of the nation, as representing the best tendencies of the national political culture. They painted the established ruling class as unpatriotic traitors of the nation. A socialist movement cannot permit right-wing currents to define patriotism. It must draw upon historic popular movements in the United States to formulate an alternative narrative on the meaning and destiny of America. The nation is

itself a unifying concept, enabling the movement to develop an integral understanding in calling the diverse sectors of the people.

(4) In defense of the national economy. A national plan for economic and social development must be formulated, in which the necessary role of the state as regulator of and major actor in the economy is articulated and explained. The essential, defining characteristic of socialism is not state ownership of the means of production, even though nationalizations in strategic industries occurred in socialist revolutions. In fact, the nations constructing socialism all have evolved to sanction multiple forms of property, including cooperatives, joint ventures, and private property, both domestic and foreign. Observing this process of evolution, we are able to discern that the defining characteristic of socialist economies is that the state formulates a plan for the economic and social development of the nation, and the state itself is a key actor in the economy. Accordingly, a socialist platform must be presented to the people, explaining the logic of a state-directed plan for national economic and social development, standing in contrast to the capitalist logic of giving priority to the profits of corporations.

(5) In defense of the social and economic rights of the people, including employment, health care, education, housing, transportation, and physical safety as fundamental human rights and needs; regardless of income, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or sexual orientation and identity. Socialist projects have an integral vision of human rights, in which not only political and civil rights are affirmed, but also social and economic rights, which constitute the foundation for a decent standard of living. These rights are universal and unconditioned, that is, not conditioned on ability to pay. In socialism, the state has the obligation to mobilize resources to ensure that the social and economic rights of the people are protected.

(6) In defense of humanity, standing against imperialist policies that sanction intervention in the political affairs and economies of other nations. A central socialist message must be that imperialist policies are shortsighted, for they seek economic gain without consideration of the consequences for other nations or for the world-system as a whole. Such an approach to international affairs by the more powerful nations is not sustainable for humanity in the long run. Here a historical and global understanding is indispensable. Socialists must understand and effectively teach to the people that the neocolonial world-system has been constructed on a colonial foundation, and it is no longer sustainable; and that our own nation's spectacular ascent was attained through strategic imperialist insertion into the evolving colonial/neocolonial world-system, an approach to world affairs

that is no longer politically, ecologically, or economically viable. Socialists must raise the banner of anti-imperialism and opposition to neocolonialism, calling the people to a genuine and true form of patriotism that is internationalist and that cooperates with other nations, seeking to develop a just and sustainable world-system.

(7) In defense of nature, in cooperation with other nations, in order to guarantee the sustainability of the human species and preservation of natural diversity. With respect to this issue, the failure of the capitalist logic of giving priority to profits is demonstrable, and it should be effectively explained to the people.

(8) In defense of knowledge, seeking to expand alternative and public media, and to transform norms for the dissemination of news and knowledge. The forms in which capitalist logic distorts the media of information and the dissemination of scientific knowledge must be well understood by socialists and effectively explained to the people.

Those of us who consider ourselves socialists do so because of a concern for a nation and a world in profound and sustained crisis. Our experiences and study have led us to the conclusion that none of the currents of thought and action that take as their starting points the assumptions, concepts, and structures of capitalism can resolve the problems that the nation and humanity confront.

We are not the first to arrive to this conclusion, in our nation or in other nations, so our commitment to socialism must include study and reflection on the historic and world legacy of which we are a part. And it must include creative political implementation of the insights attained through such study and reflection. Given the many demands on all of us, this cannot be done easily, and it would require sacrifice. However, it is our duty: to ourselves, to our nation, and to humanity.

We do not have the right to say that a historically and scientifically informed and politically effective socialist movement in the USA is impossible. We have the duty to find the road to overcoming the confusions and divisions that presently overwhelm us.