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What Socialism Can and Can't Do

Socialism seeks to transform societies and persons, bringing them to a higher stage of social justice and personal and ethical responsibility than is possible under capitalist economic systems. Can it do so? My experiences living and working in both the United States and Cuba, nations emblematic of advanced capitalism and Third World socialism, have enabled me to discern what socialism can and cannot do.

On the basis of study of the socialist projects in the world and the contradictions of the world-system, I have arrived to a reformulation of Marx's understanding of the stages of economic and social development in human history. In my view, at the present historic juncture, we are in the early moments of a stage of global transition to socialism. At the present time, socialist movements have taken political power in seven nations East Asia and Latin America. The seven states seeking to construct socialism have important allies among other states, and they have relations with many states. However, the great majority of nations continue to have capitalist political economies, and the world-economy is driven principally by a capitalist logic. The core states of the capitalist world-economy, which are in North America and Western Europe, direct the world-economy in accordance with their imperialist interests, thus imposing global structural constraints on the economic development of the declared socialist nations. In addition, the core states seek to undermine the governments of the declared socialist states, seeing them as threats to the neocolonial world-system; they impose economic sanctions and adopt various interventionist measures. Moreover, through their ownership of the media of communication, the core nations are able to disseminate capitalist values as well as

ideological distortions of the socialist projects. Nevertheless, the limitations of capitalism are becoming increasingly evident, creating greater ideological possibilities for socialist movements.

The ongoing process of human economic and social development has established the possibilities for socialism. At the same time, the stage of human development in which we find ourselves limits what socialism is able to do. As we seek to understand what socialism can and cannot do, we should keep in mind the possibilities that are created and the limitations that are imposed in the current stage of human social and economic development.

Socialism has demonstrated that it is possible to accomplish a revolutionary transformation of education. I refer here not to the fact that education is equally and fully available to all, but to the content of the teaching. In capitalist societies, higher education claims a mission of dedication to the quest for truth. Inasmuch as revolution seeks social structural transformations that are based in truth, it would appear that a sincere revolutionary in a capitalist society would be able to do intellectual work in higher education. However, committed revolutionaries doing intellectual work in higher education in capitalist societies discover resistance and repression in practice. Socialism, on the other hand, is able to liberate the search for truth and the teaching of discovered insights from the constraints imposed on educational systems by capitalism. In societies seeking to construct socialism, the socialization of revolutionary goals is integral to the mission of education.

As a consequence of the socialist transformation of education, a declared socialist nation can create a revolutionary people. That is to say, it is able to forge a people that understands the fundamentals of human history and of contemporary social dynamics. A people that actively participates in structures of popular democracy, appreciating that they are more democratic than representative democracy, because the interests of the wealthy do not distort the political process. A people that grasps the role of imperialism in maintaining the neocolonial world-system. A people that recognizes the social and economic rights of all persons, including full and equal access to education, health, housing, nutrition, transportation, culture, and sport. A people that understands the necessary role of the state as the formulator and director of a plan for social and economic development, and as a major actor in the economy. A people that knows that, in the international plane, there must be cooperation among nations and solidarity among

peoples. A people that knows that each person has to protect his or her own interests, but we all must care for one another.

In the present stage of human development, the nations that are seeking to construct socialism cannot fully provide the social and economic rights of the people. In the case of Cuba, for example, full and equal access to education, health, culture, and sport in essence exists. However, there is unequal access to housing and transportation; minimal nutrition is available to all, but there are more options for those with greater financial resources.

Nor can the declared socialist nations convert the people into a vanguard. The great majority of the people understand the fundamentals, but they are not habituated to theoretical and historical reflection. The people think concretely; they understand what they need and want, and what they have and don't have. But they do not spontaneously interpret their situation in historical and/or global context. They have to be reminded periodically of the fundamentals that they understand, and a politically conscious vanguard fulfills this pedagogical role.

The nations constructing socialism have demonstrated that they can forge a vanguard from the people. The vanguard consists of persons habituated to critical, theoretical, and practical reflection; committed to doing concrete revolutionary tasks in places of work, in government, and in civil society; and committed to the fundamental goals of the revolution, regularly making sacrifices in its defense. The vanguard fulfills important roles in the principal institutions of the society, in mass organizations, and in structures of popular power, and the people appreciate their qualities of understanding and commitment.

In the current stage of human development, a socialist project needs the vanguard to educate and lead the people. The nations that are constructing socialism are endeavoring to construct an alternative political process, in which the people freely debate and decide. But the vanguard plays a continuous pedagogical role, in which it takes a position on matters of debate among the people, it presents issue of debate to the people, or it reframes issues that emerge from the people. The vanguard must maintain the trust and confidence of the people, for if it does not, the socialist project will fall.

The declared socialist nations must have various forms of property, not only collective forms of property, such as state property or cooperatives. This follows from the facts noted: socialist projects can form a revolutionary people but cannot attain the full transformation of the people into persons with the characteristics of the vanguard, and they can only partially fulfil the material desires the people. In a situation in which material

needs and wants are not fully met, the people turn to private employment activities, such as producing goods for sale, providing services, or buying and selling goods and currencies; engaging in such activities informally. Also reflecting the limited capacity of socialist projects to fully transform the people, many of the people, including some with high capacities for production, become slack in their work habits, as a result of dissatisfaction with insufficient work incentives in state enterprises or cooperatives. The socialist state, with need to increase production in order to more completely satisfy the needs of the people, must legitimate the people's informal activities in order to incorporate them into the national economic plan, and it must encourage diligent work habits through work incentives. Accordingly, it must formally recognize self-employment and private property in addition to state and cooperative ownership; and it must establish mechanisms for pay on the basis of production, at least in part.

The declared socialist nations are unable to eliminate bureaucracy. The socialist revolution in political power must satisfy the material needs and wants of the people, and it must rely on bureaucratic structures to facilitate the production and distribution of goods and services. Inasmuch as the revolutionary project cannot eliminate bureaucracy, it cannot eliminate a bureaucratic mentality, in which people are oriented to doing their particular task, unmindful of the needs of the whole.

As a result of the fact that the declared socialist nations cannot transform bureaucratic structures and the bureaucratic mentality, they cannot eliminate habitual and taken for granted patterns of thought and behavior, which can be found not only among the people but also in the vanguard. Accordingly, persons with truly creative ideas are going to find resistance to their ideas. They will not encounter a hostile rejection, as can occur in capitalism; rather, they experience a subtle form of ignoring proposals, and when necessary, an "explanation," with excuses rather than reasons.

In spite of what it cannot do in the current stage of human social and economic development, socialism has considerable achievements. It has developed alternative structures of popular power and popular democracy. It has made considerable gains in the protection of the social and economic rights of the people, using the state as an arm to direct the economy in the accordance with popular needs. It has forged a revolutionary people that understands the fundamentals, and it has forged a highly committed and hardworking vanguard from the people. And at an international plane, the seven vanguard nations, with the cooperation of some progressive nations, have taken the first steps

toward the development of a more just, democratic, and sustainable international order, based on cooperation and solidarity, rather than domination and exploitation.

There are two principal enemies of socialism today. First, imperialist aggressors who use all means in their effort to destroy the socialist projects of the seven socialist nations. Secondly, idealist socialists, who are critical of the socialist nations, because of what they cannot attain in the present stage of human development.

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