# SOCIALISM[*]

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## Introduction

While socialist ideas may retrospectively be identified in many earlier forms of protest and rebellion against economic injustice and political oppression, socialism both as a relatively coherent theoretical doctrine and as an organized political movement had its origins in early nineteenth-century Europe, especially in Britain, France and Germany. It was, above all, a critical response to early industrial capitalism, to an unregulated market economy in which the means of production were privately owned and property-less workers were forced to sell their labour-power to capitalists for often meagre wages. The ills of this system seemed manifest to its socialist critics. Not only was the relationship between workers and capitalists inherently exploitative, and the commodification of labour an affront to human dignity, but it generated widespread poverty and recurrent unemployment, massive and unjust inequalities of wealth and economic power, degrading and soul-destroying work, and an increasingly atomized and individualistic society.

Socialists were not alone in criticizing some of these features of industrial capitalism and its accompanying ideology of economic liberalism. In particular, antipathy towards individualism was also a characteristic of conservative thought. But whereas conservatives found their inspiration in the hierarchically structured organic communities of the past, and were deeply hostile to the political radicalism of the French Revolution, socialists looked forward to new forms of community consistent with the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. For them, the evils of capitalism could be overcome only by replacing private with public or common ownership of the means of production, abolishing wage-labour and creating a classless society where production geared to capitalist profits gave way to socially organized production for the satisfaction of human needs. In such a society, the human potential for a genuinely ‘social’ mode of existence would be realized, with mutual concern for others’ wellbeing rather than unbridled pursuit of self-interest, with cooperation for common ends rather than competition for individual ones, and with generosity and sharing rather than greed and acquisitiveness – a truly human community.

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For most nineteenth-century socialist theorists, the historic task of creating such a society was assigned to the organized industrial working class; most notably by Marx, the pre-eminent figure in the history of socialism. It was Marx who (along with Engels) provided the socialist movement not only with a theoretically sophisticated economic analysis of capitalism and a biting critique of its social consequences, but also, through his scientific, materialist theory of historical development, with the confident belief that the inherent contradictions and class antagonisms of capitalism would eventually give birth to a socialist society.

In marked contrast to such earlier optimism, contemporary socialists are faced with the continued resilience of capitalist societies and the collapse of at least nominally socialist regimes in the USSR and elsewhere, regimes in which state ownership and centralized planning have been accompanied by political repression and economic failure. For those who reject the idea that a suitably regulated form of welfare capitalism is the most that can be hoped for, the task is to construct some alternative model of a socialist economy which is preferable to this yet avoids the ills of centralized state socialism.

## 1. Defining socialism

The term ‘socialism’ was first used by Owenites in Britain and by Saint-Simonians in France in the 1820s and 1830s, and soon became widely adopted to refer both to a body of ideas critical of capitalism and to the future society that would or should replace it. But disputes about the meaning of ‘socialism’ – itself sometimes contrasted with ‘communism’, at other times taken to include it as a subcategory – have been endemic to its history, even more so than with its two main ideological counterparts, liberalism and conservatism. An enormous variety of theoretical positions and political movements have been termed ‘socialist’, by proponents and critics alike. Particular versions may be indicated by some qualifying term – as in state socialism, market socialism, guild socialism, revolutionary socialism, scientific socialism, ethical socialism, even national socialism (fascism); but there is no agreed classification of types since the relevant basis for this is itself subject to dispute. For some, what is crucial is the political means through which the desired future is to be achieved – for example, revolution or reform; for others, the specific nature of socialist economic institutions – for example, state planning or decentralized producer democracy; and so on.

An especially significant issue is whether socialism is to be defined normatively or institutionally: in terms of a set of values or ideals which socialists aim to realize, and which provide the basis for their critique of capitalism; or of the specific character of the economic institutions of a socialist society. The latter option has the obvious disadvantage of leaving unmentioned just why this institutional form should be seen as preferable to capitalism, and what makes it a system worth fighting for. The former option, by leaving the institutional requirements for socialism entirely unspecified, makes it a purely empirical question whether, as many who are now termed 'social democrats' would claim, capitalism can be modified so as to realize socialist values: there would then be no logical contradiction in calling such a capitalist society 'socialist'. But given the socialist tradition's opposition to capitalism on the grounds that no such modification is possible, it seems preferable to regard this social democratic thesis, if true, as a refutation of socialism, rather than as consistent with it.

So it seems best to include in the definition of socialism both normative and institutional elements. For the socialist, the economic institutions of capitalism embody certain features and/or generate certain consequences that are objectionable from the standpoint of certain values; and there are possible alternative forms of economic organization which would either fully realize those values, or at least be markedly preferable to capitalism when judged in these terms. This, of course, is little more than a definitional schema, and leaves room for many varieties of socialism with respect both to the specific values involved and the specific form which a socialist economy might take.

On the latter question, while socialists have typically argued for the replacement of private by social, public or common ownership of the means of production, they have differed about what exactly this should involve – ownership by the state, by functional associations or local communities, by the members of producer cooperatives, and so on – and indeed about whether it is ownership or control that is crucial. Likewise, different solutions to the problems of economic coordination and allocation have been proposed: centralized planning by the state, decentralized planning, or even a market system shorn of its distinctively capitalist property relations. These different proposals are themselves often related to different views as to precisely what it is about capitalism that is objectionable and/or causally responsible for its ills: whether all relations of market exchange are undesirable, or only those involving the sale and purchase of labour-power; whether it is private ownership of the means of production that is chiefly responsible for unjust inequalities in the distribution of economic goods, or the operation of a competitive market; and so on.

On the former question, of the specific character of socialist values, perhaps the main source of variation is the attitude taken towards political liberalism. Some socialists have seen their task as engaging in an immanent critique of liberal democracy, broadly endorsing its declared values of freedom and equality but trying to show that their distinctively liberal interpretation is unduly narrow and restrictive: for example, by arguing for the extension of individual rights to include social and economic ones, and of democracy to include control over economic decisions. From this standpoint, liberal democracy is to be transcended – in the Hegelian sense of 'going beyond yet preserving' – rather than totally rejected, and the ideal of community is understood to involve harmonious relations between individuals who respect and enjoy one another's freedom. For others, by contrast, political liberalism – including its emphasis on the rule of law – is no more than an ideological facade of capitalism, so that, for example, its conception of legally enforceable individual rights has no place in a socialist society, and the value of community is understood in a manner more hostile to any form of individuality.

With these broad points about the definition and variations of socialism in mind, we can proceed to examine some of the main arguments for socialism and the critical responses to these, focusing in turn on debates about economic efficiency, human wellbeing, democracy and power, and distributive justice. While the case for socialism typically begins by attributing various ills to capitalism, it depends also on being able to show that there is some alternative system in which these would be absent or greatly reduced. Correspondingly, critics of socialism may deny either that the supposed ills are properly regarded as such, or that they are attributable to capitalism intrinsically rather than to contingent features of particular capitalist societies; and/or they may argue that the proposed socialist alternative either fails to overcome these ills, or does so only at the cost of producing further ones of its own.

## 2. Efficiency, planning and markets

Socialist critics of capitalism have frequently pointed to its economic failings. Its reliance on anarchic market forces makes it liable to cycles of booms and slumps, subjects workers to recurrent periods of unemployment and permanent insecurity, and fails systematically to make effective use of human and natural resources. For all its dynamism in producing goods to satisfy increasingly exotic consumer preferences, it leaves many basic needs unmet. It under-provides public goods, cannot incorporate the social costs of economic activity and is destructive of environmental and other preconditions of long term economic development. For many socialists the solution has been seen to lie in a centrally planned economy in which resources can be effectively and rationally directed to satisfy human needs while also meeting other social and ethical objectives.

This case against the market and in support of planning has been met by three main kinds of argument: neoclassical, motivational and epistemic. Neoclassical economic theorists claim that a market economy is demonstrably 'efficient' in the sense of being Pareto-optimal: the outcomes it produces cannot be departed from without at least some individual(s) experiencing a reduced level of preference satisfaction (see Economics and ethics §3). Admittedly this can be shown only for 'ideal' markets: for example, where there are no public goods or externalities. But such cases of (actual) 'market failure', it is claimed, can be dealt with either by limited forms of state intervention, or by assigning property rights to currently un-owned goods and resources.

The motivational argument is that socialism must fail because it makes unrealistic demands on the potential altruism of economic agents. Workers must be expected to perform their tasks without the promise of differential material rewards, and planners to put aside their own interests in making economic decisions. But humans are by nature primarily self-interested beings: the supply of altruism is strictly limited and cannot be relied upon as the basis for economic organization. The market takes advantage of this fact by providing incentives for workers and managers that ensure the allocation of resources to those spheres of production where they will be most beneficially employed. Without such incentives, socialist alternatives to the market will inevitably fail.

The epistemic argument, developed in the Austrian school of economics and especially by Hayek, is that only the market can solve the economic problem of ignorance. This problem is due to the division of knowledge in society – its dispersal among different economic agents; and to the practical nature of much of this knowledge (knowledge 'how' rather than knowledge ‘that’), which cannot be articulated in propositional form, and hence cannot in principle be acquired by a centralized planning agency. Thus no economic plan can gain access to and utilize all the knowledge relevant to economic decisions. By contrast, the price mechanism manages to distribute the knowledge relevant for economic coordination while allowing individual agents to rely on their own ‘local’ knowledge in the decisions that concern them.

Two main responses to these arguments may be made by socialists. The first is broadly to accept them, but to argue that they do not amount to a defence of capitalism but only of the market, which may itself take either capitalist or non-capitalist forms. This is the line taken by market socialists: the market is, *ceteris paribus*, the most efficient and dynamic economic mechanism, but it can be constructed in a form compatible with socialism by eliminating its distinctively capitalist features, notably private ownership in the means of production and wage-labour. Among numerous versions of market socialism, probably the closest to traditional socialist aspirations involves social ownership in the form of workers’ cooperatives whose assets are either directly owned by their members or leased to them by the state.

The second response is to challenge those arguments for the economic superiority of the market. For example, the neoclassical concept of efficiency may be criticized for defining this in relation to the satisfaction of individual wants or preferences, whatever their specific content or rationale. To show that markets are efficient in this sense is to show very little: it ignores the distinction between wants and needs, and fails to discriminate between preferences in terms of their contribution to human flourishing or wellbeing.

To the motivational argument that socialism makes unrealistic demands on altruism, there are several possible replies. One is to say that egoism is not a part of human nature, but the product of living in a capitalist society: a far greater degree of altruism can be expected in the different institutional context of socialism, either because such altruism is itself natural to humans, but inhibited by capitalism, or because human motivations are highly malleable in this respect. Alternatively, the ways in which self-interest and altruism are typically conceived and contrasted in these debates may be challenged. Actions oriented towards the wellbeing of others, and the relationships within which these take place, are often themselves a significant source of wellbeing to those concerned. The kinds of self-interest the market relies upon are unduly narrow and restrictive in character: socialism does not require self-sacrificial forms of altruism, but instead makes possible the satisfaction of a more extensive and fulfilling range of interests. But the problem remains of how workers in a non-market economy are to be motivated to move to where they are most needed.

Against the epistemic argument for the market it may be objected that the market's informational virtues are much exaggerated. The price mechanism by no means distributes all the information relevant for economic coordination: indeed competitive pressures often generate disincentives to communicate relevant information about other producers' plans, scientific and technical innovations, and so on. Nor is the information required for coordination the only information relevant for economic activity, as the frequent exclusion of environmental impacts from market decisions illustrates. Admittedly, even if such criticisms of the informational virtues of the market can be sustained, there remains a strong epistemic case against centralized economic planning. Yet there may be institutional forms superior both to markets and to centralized planning for at least some tasks, such as those involved in the organization of scientific communities. Whether these provide plausible models for economic coordination is unclear.

## 3. Wellbeing and the human good

The replies to both the neoclassical and motivational arguments for the market involve claims about the nature of the human agent and of human wellbeing. In doing so they express a recurrent concern on the part of its socialist critics with the market's failure to establish the necessary conditions for human flourishing, and its encouragement of attitudes, motivations and character traits damaging both to those who acquire these and to those affected by them. For example, it is claimed that the market issues in such vices as competitiveness, avarice, egoism, possessiveness and vanity, all at the expense of the proper virtues of character and the humanly beneficial social relationships of community; that the pleasures of private consumption are mistakenly privileged over the more fulfilling demands of public life; and that capitalist forms of production deny to workers the exercise both of their active and creative capacities in work and of their deliberative capacities in the democratic control of the productive process.

Marx's critique of capitalism as a condition of 'alienation' is typical here, but similar arguments against capitalism for its development of particular kinds of human character and social relationships incompatible with human wellbeing are to be found amongst other socialist theorists, from Morris and Tawney in the British tradition to Fromm and Marcuse in the continental. In current philosophical terminology such criticism is ‘perfectionist’ in form: it claims that social and political institutions should be judged by reference to a specific conception of the human good (see Perfectionism). It is often broadly Aristotelian in content, seeing human wellbeing as consisting of the development and exercise of species powers and capacities. Hence it rejects, *inter alia*, the utilitarian, preference-based accounts of wellbeing that often underpin the neoclassical concept of efficiency: economic institutions are to be assessed not by their ability to satisfy given preferences, but in terms of the nature and value of the preferences they themselves encourage and make it possible to satisfy (see Welfare §1).

Two kinds of response may be made to such claims. The first, which is typical of much modern liberal thought, is to reject perfectionist arguments altogether. It is a mark of liberal institutions that they be neutral between different conceptions of the good. Such neutrality is especially desirable given the pluralistic character of modern societies, in which diverse and irreconcilable conceptions of the good are espoused. In this situation, perfectionism must imply the imposition of a contested conception of the good by coercive means, and hence a political practice which is paternalistic or even authoritarian. By contrast, the market is consistent with liberal neutrality. It provides an economic framework in which individuals with quite different ends and beliefs about the good can pursue these through mutually beneficial free exchanges.

The second response accepts the legitimacy of perfectionist arguments but denies that markets are incompatible with the human good. This may be argued either by denying that the market necessarily has the ill effects that socialists attribute to it, or by attributing to the market effects deemed highly desirable in terms of some alternative conception of the good. In the latter case it may be claimed, for example, that the market has the great merit of fostering individual autonomy, although socialists may respond to this by arguing that the development of such autonomy in fact requires the existence of certain kinds of social relationships which the market tends to undermine.

## 4. Democracy, power and freedom

The claim that socialism produces the conditions for the realization of liberal political values has been central to arguments for socialism that appeal to the values of democracy and freedom. The argument can take both weaker and stronger forms. The former asserts that many of the standard liberal rights and freedoms are empty without the material conditions for their effective exercise, which the market systematically fails to guarantee. This view is sometimes stated in terms of a criticism of 'negative' conceptions of liberty as the absence of coercion, proposing instead that these material conditions should be included in the definition of liberty itself. Alternatively it may simply be argued that if (negative) liberty is valuable, then so too are the conditions for its exercise. In response to the objection that the market's unequal distribution of material conditions is the unintended consequence of a spontaneous order, and hence should not be seen as a constraint on freedom, the socialist may argue that the market is not the outcome of natural events but of social decisions aimed at its creation and/or maintenance, that its distributive consequences are both foreseeable and alterable, and that there is no justification for restricting one's conception of liberty to the absence of intentional constraints.

The stronger form of the claim that socialism realizes liberal values is that it represents their consistent application to the economic sphere. A version of this position can be found in Marx's early writings, in which the 'ideal' community of the liberal democratic polity is contrasted with the egoistic realm of modern civil society; correspondingly, the rights of citizens exercised through their participation in the political community are set against the 'rights of man' exercised by the private individuals of civil society. The project of socialism is then expressed as bringing the ideal world of the polity down to reality through the democratic transformation of economic life. This strategy of pointing to the divergence between the rights and freedoms of the ideal liberal political order and their absence in the economic sphere has also been employed in other contexts: for instance, by contrasting democratic participation in the political system with the authoritarian nature of power relationships within the capitalist firm.

To such claims that socialism represents the completion of the democratic project, two main responses may be made: the liberal and the radical. The first denies that there is a conflict between the capitalist economic order and the liberal polity: rather, the existence of a market order, in which individuals enter freely into voluntary contractual relations, is itself a condition of the political rights and freedoms that define the liberal polity. It is not a sufficient condition: authoritarian states are compatible with capitalism. However, it is a necessary condition: political liberties are only to be found in free market economies. The socialist order, by concentrating economic, social and political power, destroys the space of civil society in which individuals enter into voluntary relations independent of the state, and which provides the cultural and social conditions for opposition to state power. This objection applies primarily to centrally planned socialist economies with state ownership of the means of production, and is often endorsed by market socialists as a further reason to support their own proposals. Alternatively, it may be argued that the existence of such concentrations of economic and political power is compatible with restraint in its exercise, and that the absence of liberal political rights in state socialist societies such as the erstwhile USSR can be explained by reference to factors other than the absence of markets – for example, to the lack of liberal democratic institutions prior to their revolutionary transformation.

The second, radical response is concerned not so much with the cogency of the socialist critique of liberalism but with its completeness. In effect it extends the socialist criticism of liberalism to socialism itself. By placing its emphasis on the economic sphere, socialism has been blind to other sources of power, in particular those concerned with race and gender. Thus the feminist criticism of traditional socialism: that by confining its attention to the 'public' sphere of economic and political life it fails, like liberalism, to address the primary origin and location of women's oppression, in the 'private' sphere of the family and in 'personal', including sexual, relations between men and women. Two replies may be made by socialists to this kind of critique. The first is to claim that these other asymmetries of power can themselves be explained in terms of the organization of economic production. The second is to accept the existence of diverse sources of social power and to re-conceptualize the traditional socialist project in the economic sphere as simply one component of a wider programme of human emancipation.

## 5. Distributive justice

The final set of arguments for socialism to be considered here are distributive ones. Capitalism is criticized for the unequal and/or unjust distribution of material, social and cultural goods. But this criticism takes a number of different forms. For some socialists, the preferred distributive principle is strict equality, either contrasted with justice or regarded as its proper interpretation. Others espouse some not necessarily egalitarian principle of justice: distribution according to need is the most common, as in the well-known principle, 'from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs', but appeal may also or instead be made to a principle of desert, such as reward in proportion to contribution. While the last of these is rarely proposed as the sole distributive principle for a socialist society, it has often figured in socialist criticisms of capitalism, especially in the claim that capitalist profits are undeserved and hence unjust. But there is disagreement among socialists about whether the distribution of goods in a non-capitalist market economy would be unjust from this standpoint.

Defenders of capitalism have sometimes argued that it can be shown to be just by reference to a principle of desert: for example, by arguing that profits are a deserved reward for risk-taking. But more commonly they reject altogether the legitimacy of desert-based, need-based, egalitarian or any other so-called ‘patterned’ principles of justice in judging economic systems, on the grounds *inter alia* that any attempt to realize such patterns will involve unjustifiable and systematic coercion by the state. Instead, it is argued, justice should be understood as a purely ‘procedural’ concept: distributions are just if they are the outcome of fair or appropriate procedures, whatever the resulting pattern may be. An especially favoured procedure is voluntary exchange between free and equal parties. It is then claimed that since capitalist market transactions consist exclusively of such exchanges, capitalism is a just system.

For socialists, such procedural definitions illicitly reduce the concept of justice to that of (negative) liberty. But it may also be argued that even if adopted, they would fail to show that the outcomes of the transactions between capitalists and workers are just. For although the sale of labour-power in return for wages is a transaction between formally or legally free and equal parties, there is an absence of substantive freedom on the part of workers, coupled with marked asymmetries of power. In addition, socialists may point to the historical origin of most current capitalist holdings of private property in past acts of theft, fraud, violence or state coercion.

While arguments for socialism couched in terms of distributive justice and equality have been widely employed, they have often been criticized by Marxists, partly for assuming that the crucial defect of capitalism lies in the improper distribution of goods in the sphere of exchange, rather than in the power relations in the sphere of production consequent upon capitalist property relations. Hence emphasis is placed instead on the concept of exploitation, understood as the extraction by capitalists of surplus value from workers which accrues to the capitalist in the form of profits – something that cannot be remedied by higher wages but only by the abolition of wage-labour. Whether this concept of exploitation and its associated theory of value can be sustained is much disputed amongst socialist theorists, some of whom have argued instead for a purely distributional interpretation of the concept: for example, that someone is exploited if they would be better off than they now are had there been an initially egalitarian distribution of ownership rights over the means of production.

## 6. The future of socialism

The near universal collapse of nominally socialist regimes since the late 1980s has led many critics of socialism to proclaim its death. But these regimes have always had their *socialist* critics also, for many of whom these historic events may prove welcome, not least in undermining the previously hegemonic status of Marxist-Leninism in socialist theory and practice, and the marginalization of other significant traditions of socialist thought. Thus one response to the political and economic failures of state socialism has been to return to some of these earlier, non-centralist socialist traditions, and attempt to re-work them for contemporary purposes. One such attempt is that of the 'associational socialists' who, taking their inspiration from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century guild socialism and syndicalism, propose independent and self-governing functional associations as the units of political and economic authority, rejecting both state and market.

By contrast, as noted earlier, the project of 'market socialism' is to construct a non-capitalist market system operating within liberal democratic political institutions. This position has the virtue of being able to provide a relatively well-articulated alternative to capitalism which takes account of the powerful objections to centralized planning. Yet its acceptance of market forces, of individual self-interest and relationships of exchange and competition, makes it appear to non-market socialists a poor substitute for the 'truly human' community to which they aspire. To this its proponents may reply that one should not aim at a single, monolithic ideal of community for society as a whole, but accept instead a more differentiated conception of social existence in which different forms of human wellbeing are realized within different spheres or domains, of which the economic is but one. It remains unclear, however, whether market economies are compatible with, or inimical to, the flourishing of significant forms of community outside the economic sphere.

Further, like any market system, market socialism is subject to a range of objections from an ecological or environmental perspective: the market fails to take account of the environmentally destructive consequences of economic growth; it is unable to incorporate the interests of those who cannot engage in market transactions – whether the poor, members of future generations, or non-human beings; and it encourages people to misidentify the primary source of wellbeing as the endless pursuit of consumer satisfactions. Indeed, the environmental movement has not only presented a serious challenge to the tendency of much socialist thought to conceive of human emancipation as requiring the subordination of nature to human ends, but has also given new life to many traditional socialist objections to the market, including its remarkable ability to generate collectively irrational outcomes from individually rational behaviour, such as the underproduction of public goods and the overproduction of public ills. For both political ecologists and socialists, there is a vast range of social problems which require collective rather than individual action for their solution, and a continuing need for forms of ethical and political commitment that the market both fails to recognize and may often undermine.

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