

# CAPITALISM, SOCIALISM AND REVOLUTION: THE CONTEMPORARY MEANING OF REVOLUTION IN THE WEST\*

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. . . there must be something in every socialist, from the very values involved in wanting socialism at all, wanting a revolution to bring about socialism rather than just wanting a revolution, that continually pulls towards precisely the compromises, the settlements, the getting through without too much trouble and suffering. . . It is only when people get to the point of seeing that the price of the contradictions is yet more intolerable than the price of ending them that they acquire the nerve to go all the way through to a consistent socialist politics. . .

Once you have decided for revolutionary socialism, not because it is quicker or more exciting, but because no other way is possible, then you can even experience defeat, temporary defeat, such as a socialist of my generation has known, without any loss of commitment.

Raymond Williams<sup>1</sup>

## I

What meaning can we give to the notion of socialist revolution in the advanced capitalist countries today? It is appropriate to raise this question in the year of the bi-centenary of the French Revolution. 1789 is usually taken as marking the historical moment when the concept of revolution, as we understand it today, emerged; when the idea of revolution passed from its ancient connotation – cyclical, revolving movements in the political order – to its modern connotation: the creation of an entirely new social and political order. With 1789 we can date ‘. . . the revolutionary spirit of the last centuries, that is, the eagerness to liberate and to build a new house where freedom can dwell, [which] is unprecedented and unequalled in all prior history’.<sup>2</sup> Few would dispute that this eagerness for fundamental social transformation was carried into the world of the twentieth century by socialism, with its aspiration for liberation from the paradoxical freedom of the bourgeois revolution, that is, from the competition and exploitation upon which capitalist social relations are founded; and with its aspiration to build a fully democratic, cooperative and classless society where freedom and equality might realize rather than negate the sociability of humankind.

Yet as we approach the end of the century, it is clear that great uncertainty

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Ralph Miliband for having inspired this essay, and for his substantive contribution to it.

and confusion, hesitation and even pessimism, has come to attend the socialist project. The question of what the very concept of socialist change actually means in terms of objectives, social forces, agencies, etc., let alone in terms of methods or immediate or long-term possibilities, may well be more open now than it has ever been in this century. Such reflection on the contemporary meaning and prospects of socialist revolution as the anniversary of 1789 spawns must, in these conditions, be sober and careful. It must be mindful of past failures and disappointments. But it must above all look to the future even as it reexamines the past. For the main point of the exercise, as Marx once put it, is that of 'finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk about again.'

## II

The theme of revolution has hardly been absent from political discourse in recent years in the countries of advanced capitalism. But it has been a theme far more confidently sounded on the Right, where it has taken on the colouration of a revolution *from above*, than it has been on the Left. 'We were all revolutionaries', Ronald Reagan told his White House staff on his last day in office. 'and the revolution has been a success.' We may be sure that when Mrs. Thatcher finally leaves 10 Downing Street she will say much the same thing. It is tempting, of course, simply to characterize such rhetoric as the ad-man's cover for counter-revolution, equivalent to Reagan's earlier designation of the Nicaraguan *contras* as 'freedom fighters'. Not only a healthy degree of scepticism regarding this 'revolutionary' rhetoric is justified, but considerable rage and dismay at explicitly counter-revolutionary actions abroad against socialist regimes and movements; the reactionary turn even against the limited achievements of social democratic and liberal reformism at home; and the manifest disdain for those who seek to draw on the egalitarian and democratic legacy of 1789 as a means of defending the poor, extending women's, workers' and minorities' rights, challenging authoritarian tendencies in the state, and so on.

Yet there is a sense in which the self-characterization of contemporary capitalist politicians like Reagan or Thatcher as 'revolutionaries' might well be taken more seriously. Merely to dismiss such rhetoric as mendacious nonsense misses an important dimension of what they have been about. For they have sought to **reinfuse** their societies with the very kind of bourgeois norms and values that were identified in the *Communist Manifesto* where Marx and Engels affirmed that '[the] bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part'.<sup>4</sup> Can we not in fact say that Reagan and Thatcher have sought to immerse their societies 'in the icy water of egotistical calculation' and to leave remaining 'no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment"'? Have they not endeavoured to resolve 'personal worth into exchange value and, in

place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms. . . set up that single, unconscionable freedom – free trade'? And, 'for exploitation, veiled by. . . political illusions' have they not tried to substitute 'naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation'? Whether or not their drive to prosecute the bourgeoisie's long revolution into the world of the twenty-first century has been or will prove nearly as successful as Reagan or Thatcher would like to think, surely we must nevertheless admit that the bourgeoisie in a great many western countries in the 1980s seems to have 'conquered for itself, in the modern representative state, exclusive political sway.'

Today's bourgeois revolution from above is not the same thing as the heroic historic moment that 1789 represented. But setting aside what capitalist political leaders themselves say or do, there is a deeper sense in which it is still appropriate to see the contemporary bourgeoisie as continuing to play 'a most revolutionary part.' In the world of the micro-chip, of computer technology, of numerical control of production, of instant global communication and capital transfers; in an era of global restructuring of industry, occupation, finance and control, of workplace relations as well as the relations between gender and work, culture and household, we are perforce reminded of the essential meaning of the Manifesto's designation of the bourgeoisie as revolutionary. 'The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby relations of production, and with them the whole **relations** of society.' Consider, moreover, the very contemporary ring that our present day experience of the globalization of capitalism lends to a description penned a century and half ago:

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. . . [It] has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nation. . . [We] have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. . . [The bourgeoisie] compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.

To be sure, such developments in our own time also accompany and, to some significant extent, emerge out of the renewal of capitalist crises in our time. We live under the mark of a kind of global financial speculation that makes what Marx described in 1850 in France seem like small change. This rampant speculation, together with the Third World debt crisis and unwieldy deficits of advanced capitalist states, stands astride the revolutionary era of the micro-chip in production and communication. The return to the heartlands of the bourgeois order of mass **unemployment** in the course of the crisis of the mid-1970s and early 1980s remains all too visible over our shoulders. State macroeconomic planning and domestic and international trade and

commerce regulation are still under assault just when they appear to be most needed to ensure a modicum of stability. The edifice appears precarious indeed not only to Marxist economists but to *The Wall Street Journal*. They watch, whether with bated breath or wringing hands, for another 'great crash', even as they **marvel** at the stock exchange recovery from October 1987. And all this invites us to ask of the bourgeoisie's 'revolutionary part' in our own time whether it is not still, again in the words of the *Manifesto*, 'paving the way for more extensive and more exhaustive crises', all the while 'diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented.' Is it not now more than ever possible that the bourgeoisie 'is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells'?

Perhaps. To say the bourgeoisie continues to play a revolutionary part, in the sense we have drawn from the *Manifesto*, is at the same time to say that the renewed dynamism of the bourgeoisie in every epoch emerges out of the contradictions that spawn capitalist crises. 'Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbances of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones.' All these are present together, and to say the bourgeoisie remains revolutionary is really just to say that we continue to live in the bourgeois epoch. The reemergence of capitalist crises, the demise of Keynesianism, the class war from above prosecuted in the name of market freedom has undermined the post-war social democratic notions of an eternally stable, harmonious, 'mixed-economy', 'organized' capitalism. But must we not also cast aside such notions as 'capitalism in its death throes' or even 'late capitalism'? For even as the bourgeoisie increasingly merges and conglomerates, concentrates capital and socializes production and communication on a global scale, and even as this very concentration and socialization seems to lay the bases for new capitalist crises, so it remains the case that capitalism is still driven by competition over rates of profit, even among global giants. It is this competition that is the source of the contemporary evidence that to exist the bourgeoisie must be revolutionary in production, and in the changes it brings to relations in society more generally. It is one thing to say that capitalist development is inherently rent by its own contradictions: that remains the great insight of Marxism. But what is wrong about fatalistic breakdown expectations is not just that capitalism has consistently outlived them, but that they ignore the fact that the bourgeoisie is distinctive among ruling classes historically precisely because it cannot exist without 'constantly revolutionizing. . .'

The bourgeoisie's continuing 'revolutionary part' should certainly not be associated with unadulterated notions of 'progress'. The ecological damage being visited on the globe demonstrates how market competition pushes us against the limits of nature in a manner that is more horrific than it is 'progressive'. Barbaric social conditions, moreover, exist not only in the Third World's all too common combination of degrading poverty and brutal

that is, of *taking capital away from the bourgeoisie and democratizing control over the instruments and processes of production and communication to the end of transforming their content and function* – is reinforced by the bourgeois revolution from above in our time. As Raymond Williams suggested, this is not because it can now be shown to be quicker or more exciting, and certainly not because capitalism is about to succumb to its own contradictions so that all socialists need to do is proclaim the fact, but because *no other way is possible*.

But to say that no other way is possible is not to say that socialism itself is possible. We are often given to think today of socialism's failures in terms of the record of post-revolutionary regimes, their disappointment of original aspirations and promises, if not much worse; or in terms of the less heroic, indeed often abject, entrapment of social democracy within the capitalist framework. But from another perspective, socialism's failure stands out in the sense of the absence, especially in the advanced capitalist countries, of that *conscious, organized and creative movement for a democratic, cooperative and classless society which, in so far as it is an expression of massive popular support, is the sine qua non of realizing socialist aspirations, of the making of a socialist revolution*. To recognize this is to come face to face with one of the most sobering facts that must confront socialists at the end of the twentieth century.

Such frustration is only partially tempered once viewed in a more global perspective. Socialist revolutions there have been in the Third World in our time, from Angola and Mozambique to Grenada and Nicaragua. Indeed it has been argued, quite plausibly, that the determination of capitalist politicians like Reagan and Thatcher to redouble the effort to create a world after their own image can be seen to derive, to no small extent, from the 'explosive impact of the new wave of Third World revolutions in the seventies. . .'.<sup>5</sup> From 1974, after a decade of containment **and/or** defeat of anti-imperialist struggles, '[a] cascade of Third World revolutions, some socialist, some radically nationalist in orientation, broke out. In the space of six years some fourteen states witnessed seizures of power by insurrectionary **movements**.'<sup>5</sup> The international solidarity that has been shown to Angola or Nicaragua right through the 1980s – not only by Cuba, but by many people in the advanced capitalist countries that go well beyond the left as traditionally defined – has been admirable. In the Americas the impact of Liberation Theology and common opposition to Reagan's counter-revolutionary 'freedom fighters' has created a renewed sense of interdependence among those struggling for fundamental change, and the beginnings of dialogue regarding complementary and mutually enriching forms of **struggle**.<sup>6</sup> But it cannot be denied that the impact of such an awareness and dialogue on the advanced capitalist societies remains small; while the new revolutionary regimes themselves, even where they have survived counter-revolutionary attacks and pressures, stand cramped as well as besieged, with their fate linked to the infinitely arduous and painful climb

dictatorship. They also exist in the heartlands of capitalism, above all in the social and physical devastation of the inner cities, in the combination of unemployment and racism and the culture of violence, drug gangs and police repression that attends them. Across the river from the new palace of gold that is the Trump Tower in Manhattan lies the inhumane devastation of the Bronx. The point to be drawn from this, however, is not that capitalism is closer to 'barbarism' than it was in the 1840s when Marx and Engels celebrated the wonders accomplished by the bourgeoisie even as the conditions of inhumane life in Manchester were fresh in their minds. Both the wonders and the degradation existed simultaneously as evidence of the bourgeoisie's being the first class 'to show what man's activity can bring about'. The point is that both characteristics still simultaneously exist. In the bourgeois epoch, the bourgeoisie is always both revolutionary and barbaric. The market freedom that unleashes the wonders of the micro-chip upon Wall Street, and much more generally on production and communication, is the same market freedom that devastates the Bronx. And the rich and the poor remain equally free to sleep under the exit ramps of the Expressway.

### III

In relation to this, what can we say about the socialist 'spirit of revolution' as we approach the end of the twentieth century? The longing for a humane capitalism that would avoid the upheavals of revolution has predominantly defined the practice of the Left in the advanced capitalist countries for most of this century. But the politics of reformist compromise, however understandable, left in place a society in which the bourgeoisie continued to play the main part in production and communication, a society therefore subject to the competitive and contradiction-laden dynamic of capitalism. Even the social democratic state, or the state of the New Deal, was condemned to riding that tiger, and as that state expanded, in its bureaucratic fashion, to meet the minimal requirements of what was taken to define a humane capitalism, it became, for capital, a source of contradiction itself.

The discourse that defined the politics of compromise went as follows: why insist on the old revolutionary means, when the ends of socialism can be secured without them? Yet the politics of compromise could have no other effect than leaving the commanding heights of the economy in capitalist hands, and leaving the state itself far too insulated from popular pressures and controls beyond the electoral and lobbying devices of liberal democracy to be able to resist the bourgeoisie's assertion of its primacy. After decades of searching for a bourgeoisie that would meet the requirements of a humane capitalism, that discourse now is threadbare: the bourgeoisie's continuing revolutionary part demonstrates that the ends cannot be achieved without the means. The case for trying to define and practise a consistent socialist politics, and for marshalling the nerve to go all the way through with it –

out of the abyss of dire poverty and underdevelopment. Not to mention, of course, the fact that some of the revolutions in the Third World, from the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia to Khomeini's regime in Iran, have themselves provided their own gruesome meanings to what we must understand by 'barbarism' today.

Viewing socialist possibilities in a global perspective also means taking into account the historic developments currently taking place in the Communist world. In particular, Gorbachev's 'revolution from above' seems to be leading the Soviet Union towards recovering through glasnost some of the spirit of revolution of 1917, and it is deservedly being watched closely by socialists everywhere. An image of 'actually existing socialism' which is more humane and democratic may help to liberate socialist aspirations in the West from the totalitarian connotations spawned not only by the rhetoric of the Cold War but by the terrible reality of Stalinism. But optimism must be tempered by the implications of a new era of detente for leaving revolutionary socialist movements and regimes in the Third World bereft of support in the face of repression and counter-revolution. And it must be tempered as well by the predominantly top-down nature of perestroika so far, as well by those aspects of it that are more inspired by norms of market efficiency than by democracy. Not only does this complement ideologically the free market practices and rhetoric that have emanated from a resurgent bourgeoisie in the West; it may also, especially if capital markets are the outcome of the reform in the East, presage a large-scale penetration by international capital of areas of the globe that have been heretofore closed off to it. The revolution from above in actually existing socialism is deeply ambiguous in many respects; but one of these is the difficulty of clearly distinguishing between those developments that are leading to a recovery of the socialist spirit of revolution and those that involve embracing the bourgeois one.

Neither revolutionary developments in the Third World nor in the Communist countries, then, provide an escape from directly addressing the difficult and sobering question of the all-too-visible crisis of socialism in the West. To put this problem in perspective, two things must immediately be said about this. First, that a distinction between two meanings of revolutionary socialism, of which many socialists in the West have long been cognizant, must still be borne in mind today. On the one hand, it may be taken to mean a fundamental transformation in the social order, however that transformation is brought about. On the other hand, it may also mean the overthrow of a system of government, the word 'overthrow' being intended to convey the notion of a sudden and violent political convulsion outside the existing constitutional channels. The two notions may be related, in so far as fundamental transformation may be impossible without such a political convulsion. But however this may be, the two meanings need to be differentiated; and it is undoubtedly true that the overwhelming majority of the population of advanced capitalist countries, including the overwhelming

majority of the working classes, has shunned revolutionary change in the second meaning of the term. There have very occasionally been circumstances when something approximating to a revolutionary situation has occurred in one or another such country. But, even then, an essential ingredient to the overthrow of the system of government has usually been missing, namely the presence of a revolutionary party capable of developing extensive popular sympathy and support, and determined to use the situation to take power. Social democratic parties in this century never had such an intention: this has been unambiguously clear since World War One, at least. And the Western Communist parties, certainly from the thirties onward, have also rejected out of hand what they denounced as ultra-left adventurism or petty bourgeois romanticism. Moreover, the attempts that were made to build such revolutionary parties by groups of a Trotskyist or Maoist persuasion in recent decades have proved largely barren.

In other words, revolutionary agencies with popular support have not existed in any significant sense for revolution-by-overthrow in these countries; and there is little reason to think that this will change in any relevant perspective. The fact may be deplored, viewed as the most blatant example of false consciousness in the people and of parliamentary cretinism and rank opportunism in the leadership of socialist and communist parties. Or it may be applauded as a demonstration of maturity and wisdom, a recognition of the fact that, given the relation between state and civil society in the West, given the very nature of hegemony, the notion of revolution by 'seizing' and 'overthrowing' the 'state' is meaningless, absurd. But deplored or applauded, so it nevertheless is.

The second point that needs to be made, however, is that the absence of significant popular support for revolution-by-overthrow cannot be taken to mean absence of popular support for socialist aspirations altogether, even in our time. It is worthwhile recalling, at the end of this decade, that the 1980s opened with the programmes for socialist change figuring centrally on the political agenda in a good number of western countries: Mitterand's and the Common Programme's 1981 victory in France; the Wage Earners' Fund proposals in Sweden; the short 'march to power' of PASOK in Greece; the strength of the socialist left in the Labour Party in Britain, with that Left occupying governmental office in Europe's largest city. These developments did not appear out of thin air. They were the indirect products of the spirit of 1968, of the post-Cold War generation that spawned the New Left and the industrial militancy of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Such developments, connected as they were in the bourgeois mind with the apparent 'ungovernability' of this generation and with a rekindling of their old fears that they might lose any control over the state, were another factor in inducing the bourgeoisie's renewed determination to create the world in their own image.

Yet what is now all too evident is that there was a severe underestimation, on the one hand, of the hegemonic capacity of capitalist forces; and, on

the other hand, an overestimation of the enthusiasm of the masses and the solidarity and/or commitment of the leadership. The recently renewed disappointments regarding an electoral road to socialism in the West in the 1980s have combined with a growing disaffection from classical revolutionary approaches, even among those elements on the Left that put so much effort into reviving them in the 1970s, to produce, in the face of the bourgeois revolution from above in this decade, the confusion and hesitancy among socialists which we identified at the beginning of this essay.

Less weight may be given to the claims that there has taken place a great and irreversible ideological shift among the bulk of the population of a kind that betokens massive and deep popular support for the bourgeois revolution from above. It is probably the case that the socialist electoral options put forward in a number of European countries were unable to garner positive support from more than a quarter of the electorate at the very most (with the rest of their support coming in the form of a negative vote against the bourgeois options). But it is worthwhile setting against this the fact that even the most ardent and successful of the bourgeois 'revolutionaries' could hardly claim anything like absolute majorities. The Reagan victories in 1980 and 1984, of Bush in 1988, of Thatcher in 1979, 1983 and 1987, were all won with the support of something in the order of one-third of the population entitled to vote. And they took place against the backdrop of the failures and retreats of earlier liberal or social democratic parties in government in the 1970s.

Still, there is small comfort to be drawn from this as matters now stand. In many countries of Europe, there has occurred a distinct loss of support for, and commitment to, traditional parties of the Left in the eighties: and even where such parties have been able to stage an electoral recovery, this has certainly not occurred on the basis of their seeking popular endorsement for socialist aspirations and programmes. At best, they have presented themselves as offering a moderate defence of the welfare state against the radical excesses of the renewed bourgeois spirit of revolution. Meanwhile, in places like Australia or New Zealand, such parties really do seem determined in government to prove that they can make the market economy run better than can the bourgeois parties.

Where does this then leave the socialist aspiration for fundamental change in the West? It is hardly surprising that one of the most notable characteristics of much of the Left in recent years has been the deep pessimism which the question evokes. Again and again, the same theme in different versions is heard, namely that even the advocacy of socialism is politically damaging and doomed to relegate its advocates to a marginal and ineffectual ghetto. The tactical and strategic accent, on this view, has to fall on a moderate pragmatism and on the defence and possible extension of old reforms in a manner that does not offend the sensibilities of those seduced by the appeal of the bourgeois revolution from above of the 1980s. Where Reagan and Thatcher proclaim 'we were all revolutionaries' in the bourgeois meaning of

the term, large sections of the Left think it best to disclaim emphatically any association at all with revolutionary aspirations, even if these are conceived as being realized within existing constitutional channels. Are we to be left, then, with nothing other than the kind of opposition than that offered by Dukakis who, accused in the first televised debate by Bush of being a card-carrying member of the American Civil Liberties Union, could offer no more eloquent defence of the tradition of American liberalism than to say this was, after all, an organization which defended Ollie North? Are we merely to follow social democratic politicians such as Neil Kinnock in promising, as he did to the 1988 Labour Party conference, 'to run the market economy better than the Tories?' Better, to be fair, is intended to mean in a less barbaric and more just, less privatized and more state-interventionist, manner. And the liberal tradition does accord the right of defence even to the likes of Ollie North. But the debate is conducted on the terms set by the 'revolutionaries' of the Right. The socialist 'spirit of revolution' in the West is marked largely by its absence, or at least by its extreme marginality.

#### IV

Here, then, lies a great paradox of our time. The continuing revolutionary part played by the bourgeoisie has undermined the politics of compromise that sustained social democracy and liberal reformism in their search for a humane capitalism. This ought to make the ethical and logical basis for socialist aspirations and commitment stronger than ever. But at the same time, even the advocacy of socialism is more than ever marginalized within the societies of advanced capitalism.

What this means, first of all, is that the major political formations on the Left, which altogether dominated the labour movements and progressive intelligentsia of the advanced capitalist countries, are in the grips of a deep crisis of ideology, programme and policy, with all the tensions and uncertainties this is bound to engender. Moreover, the global competitive thrust of the bourgeoisie and the restructuring of industry that goes with it, has exposed anew the trade union constituencies of these parties to that competition, weakening the institutional base that provided support to the old politics of compromise. The leaders of these parties, and the intellectuals associated with them, desperately cling to the example of the Scandinavian societies, especially Sweden, as evidence that their project is still feasible. But to do this they must ignore the pull that the new era of bourgeois revolution, ideologically as well as materially, has had on the Swedish bourgeoisie itself, and which is causing much concern to Swedish social democrats. They must **pretend**, moreover, that all that is needed to replicate Sweden's social democratic state elsewhere in the West is to adopt this or that Swedish 'policy', technocratically conceived. They forget that the

dense institutional organization of the working class and cooperative movements that nurtured and sustained such policies emerged out of a cultural and political matrix, and a half-century of struggle and confrontation, which could only be now replicated elsewhere in the West with something very like a revolution. Many activists in these parties understand very well that a remobilization of support cannot be achieved on the basis of dry explanations of the detailed structure of the Swedish Labour Market Board. Even if that is where they too hope eventually to arrive, many of them understand that the first step in this direction entails, as it did originally in Sweden, promoting the capacity for self-organization and activism at the base, a process that requires some renewal of the 'spirit' of socialist revolution. But they are thwarted at every turn by the immediate-term electoral pragmatism that dictates the actions of those – and there are many at the base as well as at the leadership levels – who still long to cling to the politics of compromise.

In the absence of any alternative, however, the weakening of the old political and industrial institutions that practised the politics of compromise only further exposes people to the vagaries of the ethos and reality of competition. To be sure, it provides an opening for remobilization and reorganization, but the immensity of the task – do we need to start all over again from scratch? – is daunting. Moreover, the failure of the Communist parties of the West, as well as of the Trotskyist and Maoist groups, promotes further ground for pessimism. Have not only the politics of liberal reform and social democracy proved a failure, but all possible variants of a consistent socialist politics?

To affirm this would be to retreat from the creative political role that socialist intellectuals can play. We are not confined, in recognising the inability of social democracy or liberal reformism to tame the capitalist tiger, to jump backwards towards the practice of the Communists or Trotskyists or Maoists in the West, just because they too discerned the limits of the politics of compromise. There is no reason why socialists in the West today cannot reconsider the strategic possibilities of a consistent socialist politics free of the old preoccupations with sectarian debates over the lessons to be drawn from 'classical' revolutions which occurred in societies where the peasantry still formed the bulk of the population; free of the stultifying organizational structures of democratic centralism; free of the rigid teleological theories that posited an inevitable and imminent capitalist breakdown matched by an equally inevitable proletarian 'seizure' of the state; and indeed, free of the simple positing of 'soviet democracy' in stark opposition to representative democracy.

In early 1919 (at what appeared to many then and, looking back, also to many today to be the high water mark of socialist revolutionary possibilities in this century), the founder of modern social democracy in Canada, J.S. Woodsworth, entered into the debate then raging among Canadian socialists – the same debate that was raging elsewhere in the West – over Bolshevik versus Social Democratic strategy. Inspired by the British Labour

Party's explicit adoption of socialist objectives in 1918, Woodsworth took the latter side in the debate, but he nevertheless averred:

Our ultimate aim must be a complete turnaround of the present economic and social system. In this we **recognise** our solidarity with the workers of the world over. . . Such a change, we hope, will be accomplished by means of education, organization, and the securing by workers of the machinery of government.

Revolution may appear to come more slowly [in Britain than in Russia] but there will be no counter-revolution. . . It may take a few years to work out, but when its done its done for good.<sup>7</sup>

In light of what Thatcher has undone in respect to the reforms that Labour Governments had introduced, some will now find it tempting to mock Woodsworth's words. Yet to see these words as nothing but a cover for the merest reformist ambitions would be a mistake. While some would point to the explicitly counter-revolutionary behaviour of the German Social Democratic leaders in the very year the above words were written, there are no good grounds to taint thereby the sincere intentions of a great many of those who set out on the path of fundamental social change within the existing constitutional framework of liberal democracy. Indeed, in one crucial respect, and for the reasons we have already indicated, the premise that underlay the social democratic position, that an insurrectionary strategy was impossible in the West, must be recognized as having been fundamentally correct.

We must surely, finally, escape from the simplistic dualisms that have bedevilled the Left throughout this century. The Left has beaten itself up, sometimes quite literally, with debates over parliamentarism *versus* extra-parliamentarism, reform *versus* revolution, and most notoriously even today, party *versus* movement, as if one ruled out the other, black and white, or, rather, grey and red. Such dualisms are terribly misleading. Posing the issues this way gets us nowhere. The question is not parliamentarism *versus* extra-parliamentarism, but what kind of parliamentarism will not give rise to the illusion that all people need to do – all they ought to do – is vote for representatives who will then put everything right. The real problem regarding parliamentarism occurs when the point of seeking election becomes only to offer a 'team' of leaders who refuse to use their platform to engage in socialist mobilization and education. The question is not, by the same token, reform *versus* revolution, but what kinds of reforms, including reform in 'the machinery of government' itself, produce the structural changes that can be said to be revolutionary, i.e. that can not be so readily undone as to tempt one to mock the aspiration that 'when its done its done for good'. And most important, **the question** is not party *versus* movement, but what kind of party, in what relationship to the state, on the one hand, and to party members and supporters, on the other, can sustain an organized thrust for education, organization and **participation** over the broadest possible range of popular struggles for social justice; so that the intellectual and organizational capacities that are nurtured thereby yield the popular resources and support

which are, in the end, the essential condition for revolutionary change – even when elections are won.



All this, of course is more easily said than done. We noted at the outset of this essay that the very meaning of socialist change was probably more open today in terms of objectives, social forces and agencies than it has ever been in this century. This is less a cause for alarm or pessimism than it is an opportunity for creative socialist thinking and action. Although most recent reflections and polemics on the crisis of socialism in the West have focused on the question of what is wrong about traditional socialist conceptions in terms of objectives and social forces, it may be more pertinent to focus on the problem of agency, in particular of party. This is because agency is the mediating variable between social forces and objectives, the nodal point through which the two intersect. It is also because the crisis of socialism, posed in terms of whether there is any longer a significant constituency for socialist change, is bound up with the crisis of agency, *i.e.* the role parties and movements play not just in the representation of pre-given identities with 'objective' interests, but in the very formation of identities and in the articulation of interests of social groups.

It is appropriate in this context to turn back, for a moment, to the *Communist Manifesto*. There is clearly much irony in the fact that the claims it made regarding the revolutionary vocation of the working class look quite shop-worn alongside the insights that text still affords on the revolutionary part played by the contemporary bourgeoisie. Marx and Engels, while predicting ever greater and more insoluble capitalist crises, and incapable of imagining themselves in 1848 that the bourgeoisie would still play 'a most revolutionary part' at the end of the twentieth century, did not, of course, expect that socialism would emerge like a phoenix from the ashes of capitalist breakdown. On the contrary, the key to a socialist future lay in the organization of the working classes that developed on the basis of the wage labour called into existence by the bourgeoisie as the essential condition for the augmentation of its capital. The argument that in calling into existence these modern proletarians the bourgeoisie had produced 'its own gravediggers' did not rest on any notion (as it has recently become quite fashionable to argue in today's confused intellectual climate on the Left) that these modern proletarians carried revolutionary consciousness in their genes. What gave the bourgeoisie its historically revolutionary part was *competition*; what gave the proletarians their revolutionary part was *organization*. The conditions for such organization were in part established by the bourgeoisie itself, as it brought many workers together under one roof, and subjected them to similar conditions of life. It also provided means of communication that laid the basis for contact among workers of different localities,

whereby they connected together their numerous local struggles against low or fluctuating wages, against appalling working conditions and despotism in production, against restraints on workers' freedom of association, and against the exclusion of the propertyless from the new structures of representative government that the bourgeoisie had fashioned for itself in relation to the state.

The Manifesto's prediction on the revolutionary implications of working class organization long appeared to be remarkably prescient. Imagine what bells it rang for people at the turn of the century to come across the Manifesto and to read: 'Now and then the workers are victorious, but only for a time. The real fruit of their battle lies not in the immediate result, but in the ever expanding union of the workers. . . . And that union, to attain which the burghers of the Middle Ages, with their miserable highways, required centuries, the modern proletarians, thanks to railways, achieve in a few years.' Even if 'a few years' had to be taken metaphorically, can we not understand why it appeared to socialists that 'every class struggle is a political struggle' just when the earlier local and craft organization of workers seemed indeed to be giving way to the 'organization of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party. . .'?

Someone reading the Manifesto in South Korea today – or watching the rise of COSATU in South Africa – might be excused if that idea sounded very fresh indeed. Why does it sound so stale, then, in the advanced capitalist countries? The clear passage, through the post-war years, of the overwhelming majority of the population of all the western capitalist countries to the status of people who have to sell their labour to gain a livelihood within capitalism is incontrovertible. The feminization of the labour force is a most notable contemporary dimension of this, as is the growing absolute and relative number of women in the membership of trade unions. Yet none of this any longer conjures up the image that 'what the bourgeoisie produces, above all, is its own gravediggers', at least in the advanced capitalist countries. It is not just that the metaphor of 'a few years' has been so badly stretched out of shape. Nor is it just that vast and growing sections of the 'white collar sector' remain unorganized, while the old industrial unionized sector is itself declining. The point is rather that it was wrong to claim ever that 'the advance of industry. . . replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association' and that it 'therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products.' The isolation overcome via collective bargaining simply does not do this, in and of itself. Trade unions are not by themselves 'schools for socialism'. Association for the purpose of collective bargaining is just that, i.e. it is about bargaining over the price and conditions of wage labour, not over its abolition. And if this is what makes it compatible with the continuation of the bourgeois epoch, it also is what makes it subject to assault in a new era of capitalist competition and

restructuring, the kind of era we are living through today.

This would not have been news to **Marx** and Engels, of course: their revolutionary aspirations often carried them away in their rhetoric, especially in 1848. Indeed, even in the face of such rhetoric, the Manifesto's deep insight into what continuing capitalist competition and restructuring means for working class organization still jumps out at us: 'This organization of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party, is continually being upset again by the competition between the workers themselves.' Our confidence must be shaken in the notion, however, that 'it constantly ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier.' Our confidence in this must be shaken not only because of the bourgeoisie's continually revolutionary part, but because of what else has been disconfirmed alongside the confirmation of what the Manifesto had to say about the development of the working class. The identity of workers, even organized workers, even politically conscious workers, has not been something that has erased other identities, sometimes, indeed often, more immediately compelling identities in social and political terms. The Manifesto's notion that '[d]ifferences of age and sex have no longer any distinctive social validity for the working class' is plainly wrong, if it was meant to be taken as an empirical statement. The same must be said, afortiori, about race and about national identity, and, to some extent as well, about ethnicity and religion.

The point is not only, moreover, that significant differences have always persisted in terms of wages and conditions of work along many of these dimensions even in common places of work as well as across job ghettos; nor is it just that significantly different conditions of life separate workers along these dimensions in the context of patriarchy, residential segregation, relations to the agencies of social and state control, marginality on the labour market and so on. Nor even is it that the bourgeoisie has played on these differences to ensure that the competition among workers essential to capitalism's existence persists. Nor even again that working class organizations, industrial, political and cultural, have institutionalized these differences. It is rather that the identities that exist and are reproduced along each of these dimensions cannot be, and should not be, effaced in so far as they also require organization and autonomy if the groups in question (even if the majority of them are also workers) are to be able to prosecute struggles against discrimination and oppression.

All of this pertains directly to the problem that has been exercising the minds of a good many socialists of late, namely the view that the root of the inability to develop a sustained and creative socialist practice lies in false assumptions about the revolutionary potential of the working class. Having been for so long seen as the fount of the realization of socialism, a political practice that grounds itself centrally in the working class is now seen by many as the obstacle to fundamental social transformation. There are really two versions to this by now quite common theme. The first

focuses on the sociological decomposition of the old industrial working class in occupational, residential and cultural terms, and discerns in this the roots of 'the forward march of labour halted'. Out of this analysis comes a renewed call, in the face of bourgeois revolution from above in the 1980s, to revive something akin to the popular front strategy of the 1930s, targeting an electoral alliance between the elites of now weakened traditional political and industrial institutions of the working class with whatever bourgeois elites can be weaned away from the barbarism of Thatcherism or Reaganism towards a renewal of the politics of compromise. The second version goes beyond the first by challenging the notion of a distinct working class 'interest' in socialism, or indeed in anything else. Strategically, it is less concerned with alliances among elites, but, taking its cue from the relative vitality of new social movements, looks to an 'articulation' of diverse social groups, with the emphasis placed less on traditionally socialist solutions and more on completing the unfinished business of the liberal democratic revolution begun in 1789. Although the two consistently intertwine, the first version inflects back towards social democratic state interventionism and tripartite corporatism; the second version inflects towards strengthening a rather loosely defined 'civil society' against the state and capital.

Yet there is another way of looking at the problem. What becomes clear from a rereading of the *Manifesto* is not just how wrong Marx and Engels were to let their revolutionary aspirations carry them away to the point that they allowed their great insights on the historical development of capital and labour to lead them to the conclusion that '[the bourgeoisie's] fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable'. What also becomes clear is that such a claim *only* makes sense in light of the very next dimension of revolution that the *Manifesto* addresses. That dimension is the critical role played by political parties in '*the formation of the proletariat into a class.*' Only once this dimension is introduced can Marx and Engels' understanding of the bourgeoisie's continuing revolutionary role as a condition of that class's continued existence, and their sharp awareness of the vagaries that attend workers' struggles within the bounds of competition, be squared with their confidence in the revolutionary potential of the working class.

Little actual analysis of this followed in the *Manifesto*, however. Rather what followed was a brilliant polemic directed against the bourgeoisie. But once we accept the idea that capitalism does not of itself self-destruct, and that a homogeneous working class identity is neither possible, nor even desirable, then the work that parties do in the formation of the identity of the working class becomes the critical variable in the realization of socialism. The question becomes whether such parties, as they emerge out of the limited degree and form of working class identity and solidarity that develops spontaneously and through trade union organization within capitalism, can transform that identity and solidarity into a force that can realize the possibility of socialist revolution. To say this is certainly not to say they actually or

inevitably do it, of course. On the contrary, what we need to analyze, at the end of the twentieth century, is what they have done and why, and what else they might have done or could do to realize socialist possibilities.

The failure to address the question of the party's role in class formation and identity at all seriously has been the most surprising aspect of that vast literature that has been produced in the 1980s on the strategic lessons that must be gleaned from how and why the working class has failed to be the fount of socialist change. The classic texts of Marxist politics at the turn of the century, in particular, have been pilloried for assuming that the working class was innately revolutionary; but the actual work that socialist parties did (or did not do) in relation to *forming* the political and ideological identities of the working class has hardly been examined. One might think that those who put an emphasis on the importance of 'discursive practices' in the formation of social and political subjects would want to undertake such enquiry, but their work has usually been highly theoretically abstract rather than what Gramsci called 'empirico-historical'. The result, of course, is that despite their disdain for 'impressionist and sociologicistic **descriptivism**'<sup>8</sup>, the writings of the 'discourse' school has been particularly laden with *exactly* such impressionistic descriptivism in their discussion of the actual practice of working class parties (as opposed to the 'texts' of socialist intellectuals). This is also true of their discussion of the new social movements. For all of their emphasis on the importance of 'articulation' among a plurality of social forces themselves formed through discursive practice, the actual relation between leaders and led in social movements has been substantively ignored. So has been the way in which bourgeois hegemony operates to **reinfuse** with bourgeois norms and values even those people who happen to construct their identity in terms of 'struggles against oppression', so that these movements often limit their struggle to securing for their supporters the mode and extent of opportunity, independence and consumption afforded to the bourgeoisie itself.

If our objective is a socialist strategy that pertains to the overcoming of capitalism and the building of a new house in which freedom and equality might dwell, then we cannot leave substantively undiscussed the role that 'the articulators of the articulation' would have to play – nor can we ignore what organizational forms this would have to take – in order to develop out of the experiences of black and white, female and male, young and old people *who also have their labour for sale* a modicum of common understanding of the way capitalism works as a system; and a modicum of a common sense of class identity and of common fundamental divergence of interests from the bourgeoisie. For in addition to the need for respect and tolerance for the experiences that make people's identities so rich in their differences, there is also needed a sense of their common exploitation (when they are able to sell their labour) or their common marginalization (when they cannot). The link between socialism, class consciousness and class struggle lies not in the reductionist mind of the Marxist, as so many would have it today: it

lies in the nature of capitalism, the system that socialists are committed to try to transcend. For two central conditions of the bourgeoisie's existence – and continuing revolutionary part – are competition, including competition among workers, on the one hand; and, on the other, the exploitation of people who must sell their capacity to labour. The role **parties** or movements play in forming common class identities and perceptions of interest is an important (although not sufficient) determinant of realizing socialist possibilities precisely because it pertains to undermining these conditions of the bourgeoisie's continued existence.

It is, of course, possible to read the revolutionary classic texts of the turn of the century, given the idiom they were wont to **use**, in a manner that sees them as portraying political practice in terms of parties playing out nothing but pure Jacobin-style vanguardism; or, at the other extreme, as being nothing but the bearers of innate revolutionary aspirations of working class people. But such readings miss that dimension of socialist thought and practice which understood political organization neither in terms of the formation of a self-contained crack-troop of revolutionaries, nor in terms of the merely passive representation of pre-formed class consciousness, but rather as the very arena in which hegemonically-oriented class identity and consciousness were formed. In any case, precisely because they were traversing such virgin terrain, those who were the embattled leaders of the mass working class parties, which were, after all, an entirely new phenomenon in history, should hardly have been taken – on the basis of pamphlets and speeches wherein polemic and analysis were inevitably very much admixed – as providing the last word on the subject. Much less should they so be taken today either by those who pillory them for their faults or by those who treasure them for their insights.

Writing in 1922, **Lukács** appropriately began his essay, 'Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organization', with the following words:

Although there have been times when problems of organisation stood at the forefront of debate (e.g. when conditions of amalgamation were under discussion), it nevertheless remains true that theorists have paid less attention to such questions than to any others. The idea of the Communist Party. . . has yet often been seen purely in *technical* terms rather than one of the most important *intellectual* questions of the revolution. . . [N]o really vital theoretical energy seemed to be left over for the task of anchoring the problem of organization in communist theory. If much activity in this sphere is correct, this is due more to correct revolutionary instincts than to any clear theoretical insight. On the other hand, there are many false tactical attitudes, e.g. in the debates on a united front, which derive from a mistaken view of the problems of organization.<sup>9</sup>

This essay by **Lukács**, now much ignored, still bears careful reading today. In many ways what he had to say in this essay is not very far different from another great revolutionary theorist of the 1920s who carried much further still the analysis of the role of party in revolutionary change, Antonio Gramsci. Attention has been properly paid to the 'war of position' versus 'war of manoeuvre' in the West, to the problem of ideology, to the concept

of hegemony and to the question of 'alliances'. But the issue that concerned him most, the issue that pervaded his whole work, i.e. the determining role (and proper organizational form) of the mass party, of the 'Modern Prince', not only in the formation of appropriate strategy for socialist change, but in the creation of the collective will to change, above all in the working class itself, has gotten much less attention in this decade of socialist confusion and hesitation. If we paid more attention to the stress he laid on 'the importance and significance which, in the modern world, political parties have in the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world'; and if we addressed the limits and failures of the predominant working class parties in this respect; then we would probably learn far more about 'what is to be done' than from dwelling on the sociological decline of the industrial working class or the proliferation of 'identities'.

In Gramsci's conception, the main role of the mass party, was not that of putting forward a team of political leaders, as broadly representative as possible of public opinion in an electoral contest. Nor was it that of forging a small band of revolutionaries. Nor was it that of coordinating a 'network' of alliances. Its main role – and its organizational form and political philosophy had to be forged in relation to this role – was that of

... elaborating its own component parts – those elements of a social group that have been born and developed as an 'economic' group – and turning them into qualified political intellectuals, leaders and organizers of all the activities and functions inherent in the organic development of an integral society, both civil and political. . . . That all members of a political party should be regarded as intellectuals is an affirmation that can easily lend itself to mockery and caricature. But if one thinks about it nothing could be more exact. There are of course distinctions to be made. A party might have a greater or lesser proportion of its members in the higher grades or in the lower, but this is not the point. What matters is the function, which is directive and organisational, i.e. educative, i.e. intellectual.<sup>10</sup>

Only with such a conception of what it means for parties to aim at 'the formation of the proletariat into a class' can we conceive of realizing socialist aspirations. It may, of course, not be possible. But we need to ask, as a priority, whether socialist parties have been oriented this way and, if not, whether it is now possible to create parties and movements that are. It is symptomatic of the current crisis of the Left, of the retreat from the creative role that socialist intellectuals can play, not only that this question has been so little addressed, but that on the few occasions it has been addressed, the tendency has been to substitute a mechanistic and pessimistic 'inevitability of failure' for the earlier mechanistically optimistic 'inevitability of revolution'. For instance, this decade's single major comparative historical study of the interrelationship between party and class formation, Przeworski and Sprague's *Paper Stones*<sup>11</sup>, sets out to prove that there is an insurmountable barrier to realizing socialist aspirations in the West. The role of socialist parties in organizing workers into the political and ideological force called the working class is appropriately stressed; and it is recognized that this in turn

generates the possibility of structuring social and political conflict along lines that go to the core of a challenge to capitalist hegemony, since this hegemony is founded on the denial of the salience of class. But there is a catch, a trick of capitalist social structure, which when combined with political democracy, determines that the work that socialist parties do in relation to the formation of class identity and organization is inevitably frustrated. And this determines a miserable outcome for the aspiration to achieve socialism in the West.

What is this 'catch'? As for choosing democratic means, there was, in the West, no real choice for socialist parties. They had to participate in elections since votes offered a welcome and viable substitute ('paper stones') for the fraught and bloody confrontations of the barricades. But since elections are decided by numbers, the fate of socialism was sealed, since workers, according to the narrow definition adopted by Przeworski and Sprague, have always been a numerical minority. (Workers allegedly are only 'manual' employees in 'productive' industries; nonmanual employees in these industries, all employees in 'non-productive' industries, as well as the agricultural petite bourgeoisie are all defined as 'middle class'.) Consequently, to win elections socialist parties had to broaden their appeal to potential allies in the 'middle class' to achieve electoral success. They were therefore forced to cast their appeal in such a way that it undermined their ability to define politics, even for the workers they organized, in consistent class terms.

It is probably correct that the political practice of electoral socialist parties increasingly tended towards diminishing the salience of class identity among workers. But the question that needs to be asked is whether this occurred because of socialist parties electoral appeal to the broadly defined 'middle class'. Despite the transformation of white collar work amidst the passage of the vast majority of the population to the status of those who had to sell their labour to gain a livelihood, Przeworski and Sprague are able to cite attitudinal surveys to show that even lower level and unionized salaried workers tend not to think of themselves as working class and that manual workers do not recognize them as such. But is it in fact objectively impossible for this to be otherwise? Przeworski and Sprague undertake no detailed analysis of the nature of the appeal made by socialist parties to salaried or non-productive workers, or how it coincided with or differed from the appeal they made to allegedly 'real' workers. In fact, they do not undertake any systematic examination of the actual ideological and organizational transformations of the parties in question. The strategies they ascribe to parties are largely intuited from the distribution of votes, as embellished only by the odd reference to this or that phrase in a party programme. Other factors that might account for the attenuation of the parties' role in the formation of class identity, apart from the alleged minority status of ('productive') workers, are not systematically treated. Perhaps the parties diluted their class appeal (with appeals to nationalism, to local particularism, to deference to 'expertise', to moderation and consensus) because they sought to gain (the easy way,

i.e. on the terrain of a hegemonic bourgeois discourse) the votes of those many *manual industrial workers* who resisted or were at least unmoved by earlier 'pure' class appeals? Perhaps they diluted their class appeal because the leaders themselves came to adopt some of these values themselves? Perhaps their decision not only to engage in electoral competition, but to accept the very structure of *parliamentary* decision-making, embodying the Burkean notions of a sharp separation between decision-makers within the state and the class 'without', itself had the effect of disorganizing the class they organized electorally in terms of a class appeal? Perhaps these parties diluted their class appeal because they sought to strike a compromise with capitalists, or to rationalize such a compromise entered into pragmatically by their leaders while in state office?

In other words, among the constraints socialist parties faced in respect to the formation of the proletariat into a class, not only the limited votes of industrial manual workers need to be counted; or at least such electoral constraints can only be counted in the context of other and ultimately more daunting ones, above all the power of capital and its ability to disorganise workers through competition as well as through its material and ideological reach *among workers and among socialist party leaders*. In the face of this **constraint**, such class identity as these parties continued to develop even among manual industrial workers was based on a notion of class interest increasingly conceived within the framework of capitalism, Burkean parliamentarism and trade union identity. Some parties could for a considerable time retain electoral loyalties from many workers on this basis, especially where a strong trade union movement itself fostered continued working class identity. But it became disconnected from any attempt to identify class interest with socialism, or at the very least it involved a redefinition of socialism so that it effectively meant corporatist-style state planning for capitalist economic growth.

The last paragraph of Przeworski and Sprague's book is cast in broad enough terms to fit this interpretation: 'Leaders became representatives and the struggle for socialism was delegated to representatives. . . They succeeded in making the very possibility of socialist transformation seem so distant from our daily lives. . .' Nevertheless, they still give the impression that it would all have been different if industrial workers were a numerical majority; that it might yet be different if socialist parties could only drop their ties to the working class; or that elections should now be simply ignored by socialists. Such **either/or** options are not the stuff of effective strategy. The first requirement for such must surely be that the parties become once again committed to socialism as a goal, and that they recognize clearly the salience of class for effecting a challenge to capitalist hegemony. This means actively engaging once again in fostering working-class identity (among 'productive' and 'non-productive' workers) in the face of a capitalism which constantly deconstructs and reconstructs industry, occupation and locale. But it means

above all (here we must learn well what Gramsci taught) developing the capacity among their members and supporters to offer socialist leadership in their communities in relation to multifarious forms of subordination, deprivation and struggle. This is not a matter of imposing a rigid set of socialist maxims on every struggle; it is a matter of developing the capacity to organize in a manner that relates socialist understanding and commitment to the problems and struggles of everyday life; and to engage in political discourse in a manner that is educative and that recasts and challenges the terms of capitalist hegemony.

## VII

We turn, finally, from questions pertaining to whether constituencies for socialism can be fashioned by appropriate socialist agencies, to the question of socialist goals today. Here too, as we observed at the outset, hesitation and even pessimism are usually the order of the day. A recognition that social democratic reforms were inadequate to stay the 'revolutionary part' played by the bourgeoisie, forms some grounds, even among those who cling to the politics of compromise, for this hesitation and pessimism. If the answer to this is offered by socialists that these reforms had to be structured in a manner that led to popular support for taking capital away from the bourgeoisie, however, this answer then confronts another problem. For there is a widespread sense, in the context of the internationalization and globalization of production and finance which has advanced with extreme speed in recent years, that 'nationalization' – the word itself is significant – is no longer capable of laying hold of such integrated means of production as would lay the basis for coherent production or socialist planning. In other words, in so far as the locus of political power and democratic participation remains at the level of the nation state, the question is posed of whether, even if a socialist party were strongly legitimated at the polls, a socialist government could proceed very far to install a socialist programme in a world of international capitalism, where production itself, let alone finance and commerce, is increasingly and ever more tightly intermeshed. On top of all this, the turn to markets in the countries of 'actually existing socialism' seems to many in the West to proclaim once and for all that socialism, as a viable alternate economic system to capitalism, is a non-starter. We argued above that today's bourgeois revolution ought to reinforce on both ethical and logical grounds the basis for a commitment to socialism. Many would grant the ethical grounds; far fewer would grant the logical ones.

There are no easy answers to these problems, any more than there are to the problems of constituency and agency. What must first of all be said, however, is that in so far that these problems lead socialists straight back to the politics of compromise, then this is obviously no answer at all. It is not that reforms were not worthy. Who could say this about *social citizenship* reforms, which

established rights in civil society such as education, health care, freedom of association? Or *redistributive reforms* such as old age pensions, social security, progressive taxation? Or *regulatory reforms* such as occupational health and safety standards, pollution controls, hours of work and minimum wage regulations? And who could say this about *public ownership* reforms, whether of utilities or transportation, or coal mines or steel mills, or indeed of housing and land? The only problem with these reforms was that they did not go far enough. They could not go far enough without fomenting a political break with capital, which, for all the reasons we already identified, the politics of compromise could not sustain. It could not sustain this increasingly by the inclination of social democratic leaders themselves, but also by the fact, which was of course related to the question of leaders' inclinations, that the parties that conceived and introduced such reforms failed to prepare their constituencies for such a break. They therefore could not count on their support, much less on their 'intellectual' capacities (in Gramsci's sense) to take over the organizational and administrative functions which seeing through such a confrontation would have demanded.

In saying these reforms did not go far enough, this does not just mean in a *quantitative* sense: more universal rights; more progressive taxation and social benefits; more regulation of capital, of its products, of the labour process and of labour markets; more public ownership. We mean that the reforms that were introduced always *qualitatively* fell short of their promise. The rights to education were always compromised by a hierarchy in education, by restricted access to quality education and by the content of education that reflected the class society in which education was embedded. The laws which granted and sustained freedom of association for workers also always policed trade union behaviour and limited the range and scope of industrial struggle. What was given in the form of progressive taxation was taken away in incomes policies, sales taxes, and the absence of price controls even on basic necessities. The social benefits were administered in such a bureaucratic fashion that even those most dependent on them could hardly feel that the 'welfare state' was theirs to influence, let alone control. Unemployment insurance was usually just that: insurance which reproduced the labour market even as it regulated and subsidized its vagaries. (That is, to get it, in most cases, you needed to have been employed; you then needed to be fired or laid off; you then needed to be actively looking for work; and you then lasted on it only as long as your previous payment of 'stamps' allowed.) The regulation of capital and of production and of products was always compromised by the close intermeshing of the regulators and the regulated when it came to the bourgeoisie – and by the distance from the regulators when it came to workers or consumers. The public ownership was state ownership, with economic democracy being outlawed (or, in a few instances, trivialized) to such an extent that few workers or consumers could feel they were losing something that belonged to them even when privatisation threatened their

livelihood or quality of service. There were many variations in the reforms introduced in the advanced capitalist states. Yes, Sweden was (and remains, mercifully) very different from the United States. That said, the picture we have drawn is more or less recognizable in all of them.

The reason for this was inscribed in the politics of compromise. Partly this was because the reforms had to be structured and to operate in a manner that sustained capital accumulation and business confidence. But partly it was also because a dimension of reform, which would have radically transformed every one of the others mentioned, *the democratic reform of the machinery of government itself*, was absent. A reform in the state's own *modus operandi*, which would have meant the integration of popular representation and administration, and the control of the representative through recall and regular turnover, was very rarely conceived within the social democratic project. Whether this was because of a lack of imagination, or a sincere belief that parliamentary democracy was the end point of democracy, or the oligarchy that developed in social democratic parties, remains an old but still interesting question. Or did it, perhaps, above all reflect an *anticipation*, conceived sub-consciously in the politics of social democratic gradualism and compromise, that capital would at all costs insist on the separation between decision makers and the people (short of the election of a political 'Board of Directors' every four or five years) lest the state set an example for the 'private sector' of a new form of decision making and administration which, if also struggled for and adopted in the 'private sector', would divest the bourgeoisie of its control over capital. After all, at least under 'nationalisation', it got compensated and could employ this liquid capital for accumulation elsewhere!

Was it then surprising that capitalist competition continued to underpin the whole structure of the society? And as the bourgeoisie adopted new directions and patterns of competition in, through, and around the 'interventionist' state, and as it entered new crises in the course of this competition, the 'interventionist' state found itself condemned to managing these crises in a manner that usually quantitatively as well as qualitatively retrenched on the earlier reforms. Was it then surprising that some of those who still nevertheless really benefited from the reforms could recognise in the bourgeoisie's new 'revolutionary' assault on the state some symbols that appeared to speak to their own alienation from it, although that alienation was very differently situated from that of the bourgeoisie? What is actually surprising is that so many people kept their heads, and saw through that aspect of the revolutionary rhetoric of Reagan and Thatcher that was indeed mendacious nonsense. This not only kept their vote at the absolute (if not relative) low level we spoke of, but it also restrained the inroads they could make against the old reforms.

Yet from the perspective of socialist goals, no matter how necessary it still is to defend the old reforms for what was always positive and humane about them, the project of restarting the motor of the old politics of compromise, even if the bourgeoisie could again find it in its interest to cooperate, is no

answer at all to the problems we identified. We must admit, however, that to those other problems, we can offer no definitive answers. This is because any attempt at socialist transition, once we conceive it as something other than the inevitable outcome of implacable historical laws, is **inherently risk-laden**. It is beset, as Rosa Luxemburg once famously put it, by 'a thousand problems'. And that is why, as she insisted, the democratic freedoms of expression, assembly and association are so necessary to finding 'the thousand solutions' she hoped would also emerge. The main grounds for her optimism were not different from Gramsci's (or, indeed, Marx's): they lay in the reliance on the creativity of human beings (the same creativity that distinguished the architect from the bee) and in the knowledge and experience that people might acquire from organizing sufficiently well (not only technically but intellectually) to make a revolution possible in the first place. To quote that famous passage:

. . . we know more or less what we must eliminate at the outset in order to free the road for a socialist economy. But when it comes to the nature of the thousand concrete, practical measures, large and small, necessary to introduce socialist principles into economy, **life** and all social relationships, there is no key in any textbook. That is not a shortcoming but rather the thing that makes scientific socialism superior to the utopian variants. The socialist system of society should **only** be, and can only be, **an** historical product, born out of the school of its own experiences, born in the course of its realization, as a result of the developments of Living history. . . The negative, the tearing down can be decreed; the building up, the positive cannot. New territory. **A** thousand problems. Only experience is capable of correcting and opening new ways. Only unobstructed, effervescent life falls into a thousand new **forms** and improvisations, brings to light creative force, itself corrects all mistaken attempts. The public life of all countries with limited freedom is so poverty-stricken, so miserable, so rigid, so unfruitful, precisely because, through the exclusion of democracy, it cuts off the living sources of all spiritual riches and progress. . . The whole mass of the people must take part in it. Otherwise it will be decreed from behind a few official desks by a dozen **intellectuals**.<sup>12</sup>

Luxemburg was, of course, speaking to the Russian Revolution, as she wrote these words. And these words are still germane in relation to the pessimism on socialist possibilities induced by the turn to markets today in 'actually existing socialism'. If this is to be taken by socialists in the West as the paradoxical proof that the Western bourgeoisie's almost century-long **aspiration** to **reverse** the Russian Revolution **is** finally being realized, we need at least to ask whether this is really because the horrendous problems experienced by socialism in the USSR over the last 70 years was due to the **absence** of market freedoms – or whether, as Luxemburg warned, it was due to the absence of democratic freedoms. It is still far too soon to say whether the salvation of that society, if there will be one at all, will lie in the 'icy calculations' of cost-accounting introduced through an economic perestroika from above or in the democratic creativity induced by a political and intellectual glasnost that takes root from below.

Is logic then really on the side of a commitment to socialism, after all? We should probably not go so far as to claim this. We said earlier that socialists cannot achieve their ends without the means, i.e. without taking capital away from the bourgeoisie. The experience with the politics of compromise has

indeed proved this to be more and more logical, in the sense we have described. But the experience of 'actually existing socialism' as well as the limited range of even a democratic state to plan in today's international capitalist order suggests that taking capital away from the domestic bourgeoisie is no answer in itself. This end can, in fact, really only be a means, as Luxemburg understood, to the realization of socialism, the 'tearing down' that but opens up the *possibility* of the 'building up'. Robin Murray, who seems to have thought through most clearly, among socialists today, the limits of 'nationalization' in the face of capitalism's global integration of production, finance and commerce, has nevertheless **also explained why** '[t]he case for public ownership is as strong as it ever **was**.'<sup>13</sup> The restructuring taking place today reveals the limits of the bourgeois revolution. 'In the economy as a whole there are great barriers between sectors, which the market **only** makes worse. I am thinking of the relations between finance and industry, of military technology and civilian diffusion, or of branch plants and the wider economy. These are arguments for industrial **restructuring** and macro-economic **planning** which formed the core of the case for nationalization fifty years ago.' But there is even 'an even stronger argument', as Murray affirms, in so far as socialists have come to recognise, out of the experience with state ownership in this century, the priority that needs to be given not just to changes in ownership but to changing the social relations of production.

One has only to read a few pages by socialist **economists** in the 1930s – Marxist or Fabian – to sense the extent of change that has taken place in socialist thinking today. The experience of the guerrilla movements, of a variety of post-revolutionary experiments, of the women's movement, the black movement, and a multitude of progressive community campaigns, **all** have contributed to a shift of focus towards the social relations of socialism. . . [T]his has meant a concern with the nature of work, with the division **between** mental and manual labour, with the question of working time and conflict between capital's time and labour's time (to have children, to collect them from school, to have time for meetings and classes, to control one's own working time rather than being paced on the line, and so on). It means a concern for different segments of the working class, unskilled as well as skilled, women and black people as well as the white male and white-collared workers. It also involves a concern for the use values of production and the diversity of **need** – with the saving of energy rather than nuclear production, for example, or with cultural variety and self-production rather than standardized mass consumption. . . [I]t is now realized that the forces of production are not neutral but that technology has been developed in such a way as to increase capital's control over labour. Nor are commodities neutral. They reflect in their content, and even their design, the particular production relations of capital.

This catalogue of contemporary socialist 'common sense', as Murray calls it, would not have sounded as foreign to the ears of the authors of the *Communist Manifesto* as many presume today. If much of this was ignored by socialists fifty years ago it reflected both the limits of the **politics** of compromise and the limits of a revolutionary socialism 'decreed behind a few officials desks'. Even then, such 'socialisms' were not accomplished without considerable repression or marginalization of those socialists who did not forget that, above all, capital, as the *Manifesto* put it, 'is a social power'; and that whereas in 'bourgeois society living labour is but a means to increase accumulated labour', the point of the whole socialist project was

to build a 'society in which accumulated labour is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer.' But if it is now more widely accepted amongst socialists that this cannot be achieved if we just try to revive the old, now unpopular, state ownership, so it must nevertheless also be made clear again, not least to the confused **and** dispirited socialist intellectuals of our time, that, as Murray puts it:

If the aim of socialist economics goes beyond **restructuring** industry and improving productivity. if its aim is to change the social relations of production in production, then expanding social ownership becomes a necessity. For in spite of the fact that social enterprises are hedged round by monopolies and the market, in spite of the fact that they have to rely on capitalist managers to run them, these difficulties are only compounded if private property gets in the way. The reason why nationalization and social ownership should still be at the centre of any socialist strategy is that only in this way can we make progress in. . . 'the politics of production'. . . It must match capital in productive performance, yet change the social character of production in such a way that it regains popular support. It must show that it can work in practice, since nothing is as strong as the propaganda of practice. That alone will put nationalization back on the political agenda, not as a socialist solution but as a midwife to the socialist problem.

We must be clear, as well, that social ownership today, if it can be revived as an aspiration among socialists, and if political agencies can win the popular support to try to effect fundamental change through its introduction, can itself only lead at present to a new politics of compromise. Socialism will still not happen at one go. Certain sectors – whether they will be commanding heights or more modest fortresses of capital will depend on the locus and extent of popular support may be taken away from capital and transformed in their social purpose and administration. But they would still have to negotiate between the rocky shoals of powerful bourgeois hostility and market competition. Less metaphorically speaking, they would have to negotiate a degree of autonomy amidst their dependence on domestic and international bourgeois forces sufficient to allow them to act in a manner that liberated the human creativity that is in the end the sole basis of solving the socialist problem. But to look at public ownership as a necessary means to socialist ends is to see things in a very different way from the old politics of compromise. It would, indeed, be more akin to the politics of compromise that post-revolutionary regimes have always had to **follow to survive in** a world still in the bourgeois epoch. Our hope must be that we can gradually build out of a new 'spirit of revolution' – and on the basis of the limited autonomy that spheres liberated from bourgeois control could furnish – the grounds upon which that epoch would really be, gradually but fundamentally, challenged. This would then be a very different politics of compromise, a very different gradualism, precisely because it would be based on developing the intellectual capacities in the mass of the people, to organise and administer, to plan and create, wherein lies the true meaning of socialist revolution.

But this must take us back once more to the question of agency. The first goal of all socialist parties and movements, on the basis of whatever organizational resources they can muster today, and eventually with the resources

they can liberate from capital and the capitalist state, must be to help form a new working class identity and intellectual capacity so that the members and supporters of these parties and movements actually do become, as Gramsci put it, 'leaders and organisers of all the activities and functions inherent in the organic development of an integral society, both civil and political.' They will need to be able to replace the capitalist managers on which even public ownership is now dependent. But they will need, first of all, to be able to learn and explain clearly how capitalism works as a system in the process of the organisational work they do, and to try to prefigure the kind of practice that will contribute to learning how to 'build up' even while people become committed to 'tearing down'. Programmes will be needed, but socialist intellectuals – partly because they are still too oriented to trying to educate the **ruling** class to socialism – are mistaken to give the priority they do to this today. The reforms they advance must rather be oriented to reviving, indeed building anew, the 'spirit of revolution' against the existing structures of power and privilege. The socialist purpose even today does involve 'building up', but this must mean building up whatever prefigurative changes can be achieved within the framework of actually existing capitalism, whether the sphere is health, education, housing, transport, the environment, or day care, or whether it is trade unions, parties or social movements themselves, since their organizational structures and political and ideological practices are far from being conducive enough to the task.

Popular support, in the form of votes for parties committed to socialist change, is essential; but such expression of support at the polls can never be enough. What is required is the penetration of socialist ideas and creative organisational and intellectual capacities throughout society. Revolutionary socialist change, in other words, requires the implantation and development throughout society of a socialist presence, at the moral, ideological, political and economic levels in the broadest possible range of institutions in society: in the parties, unions and movements long identified as composing the 'Left', but also in factories, offices, schools, universities, churches, community centres, and even in that contemporary centre of working class life – the shopping mall. This implantation forms part of what Gramsci called the 'war of position'. But there is today no single 'Modern Prince'. The task cannot only devolve today on socialist parties – although such parties must be built, or transformed into something very different from what they have been. But the task must also be undertaken by other organisations and agencies – feminist and ecological movements, anti-racist and peace movements, the movements of the physically and developmentally handicapped and the movements of those handicapped by poverty. In all of these and other movements, and in building alliances among them, those committed to fundamental social change must also pay careful attention to ensuring that the relationship between leaders and led is productive of popular capacities for **organisa-**tional and intellectual development. Only in this way – and obviously, after

all we have said, nothing is inevitable – will socialists be able to find 'once more the spirit of revolution'. And only in this way will that socialist spirit of revolution really make itself felt against a bourgeoisie that will certainly continue to struggle with the working class over who will play, historically, the most revolutionary part.

## NOTES

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2. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking, 1965), p. 28.
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4. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in Karl Marx, *Political Writings Volume I: The Revolutions of 1848*, D. Fernbach, ed. (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 70. All ensuing quotations from the *Manifesto* are drawn from this edition, pp. 69–81.
5. Fred Halliday, 'The Sources of the New Cold War' in *Exterminism and Cold War* (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 298–9.
6. See Roger Burbach and Orlando Nuñez, *Fire in the Americas: Forging a Revolutionary Agenda* (London and New York: Verso, 1987).
7. Quoted in Kenneth McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J.S. Woodsworth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959), pp. 134,96.
8. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), p. 2.
9. Georg Lukács, 'Towards a Methodology of the Problem of Organization' in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London: Merlin, 1971), p. 295.
10. ~~Selections~~ *from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith, eds. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), pp. 14–15. Cf. p. 335 for the quotation in the previous paragraph.
11. Adam Przeworski and John Sprague, *Paper Stones: A History of Electoral Socialism*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press: 1986).
12. Rosa Luxemburg, *Selected Political Writings*, R. Looker, ed. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), p. 246.
13. Robin Murray, 'Ownership, Control and Markets', *New Left Review*, 164, July/August 1987, pp. 101–3.