

Additional Dialogues

Is socialism inevitable? Is capitalism doomed?

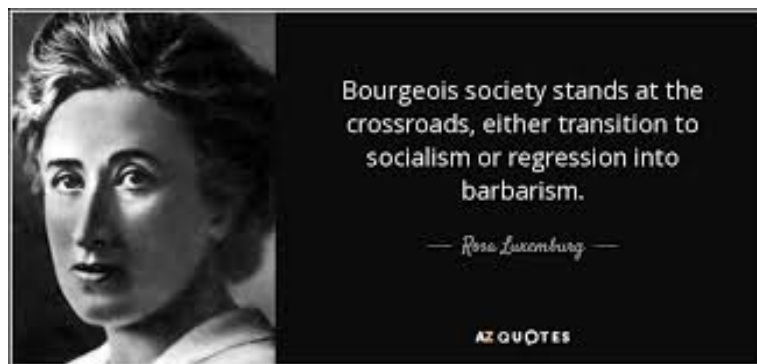
In the November 1 issue of the Bulletin, as part of a discussion of global warming, Rod stated that he disagreed with a statement by Wayne that, "Only a bottom-up revolution can lead to sustainable ecological balance." Rod argued that this formulation (and others Wayne had advanced in the discussion and elsewhere) suggested that global warming will destroy the planet unless there is a revolution, and, more generally, that capitalism is 'inherently' doomed. This led to the discussion below.

October 30

Rod,

It would take a lengthy piece to even begin to argue this point. It is not based on faith but on careful reasoning, which has satisfied me if not you. I try to argue some of this in a condensed fashion in my essay on the anarchist vision:

"This does not make socialism (anarchism, libertarian communism) inevitable. On the contrary, it means that capitalism has a dynamic that leads to greater and worse crises and catastrophes. As an economic system



it is deeply flawed and irrational. It is highly unlikely (I will not say "impossible") that it can pull out of its current extended crash-landing and return to a period of stability and relative prosperity. The last time it did

this, from the late 1940s to 1970—1975, it was at the cost of a Great Depression, a World War, post-war spending on nuclear arms, and the vast use of fossil fuels. To revive itself, even for a time, would require something similar. It seems unlikely that the system could survive either another world war or a deepened misappropriation of the natural world."

Wayne

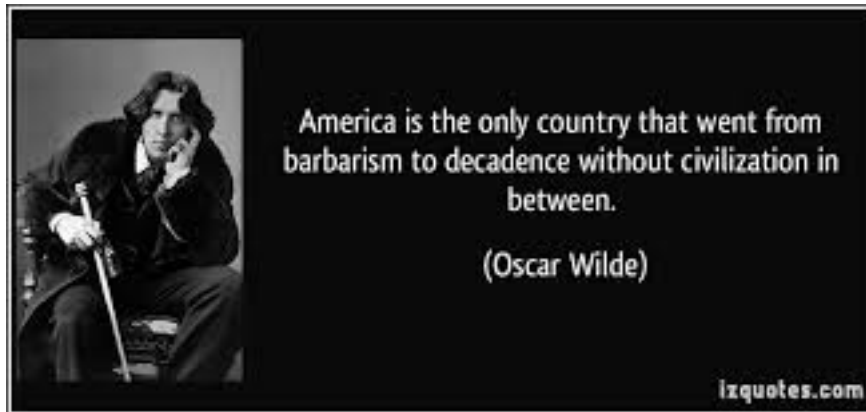
October 30

Wayne,

Yes, it is an ongoing discussion that comes up in various forms. I read your anarchist vision essay, and my reaction was that you are trying to have it 'both ways,' i.e., conscious vision and will are 'good things' (and Marx and Engels should have emphasized them more), but, regardless, capitalism is marching 'of its own accord' toward collapse. This is expressed in the paragraph from you quoted above, most directly in the statement: "*capitalism has a dynamic which leads to greater and worse crises and catastrophes.*" I will grant that the industrialization/modernization of society (and the destructive capacity of technology that comes with it), results in crises that can be, and at time are, more devastating than ever before. (The killing in the U.S. Civil War vastly exceeded that of the Revolutionary War and, on world-scale, the death and destruction of WW I exceeded anything prior to that.) But, the ever-increasing constructive and destructive capacities of technology are variables that, while *connected* to capitalism, are not capitalism *per se*.

I also understand that you believe you are using empirical evidence (rather than 'dogmatic theory'), to arrive at your point of view. I find the empirical evidence wanting, largely because it is always piled a mile-high with qualifiers. By this I mean: WW I seemed like a descent into barbarism (people certainly felt that way at the time), but the world managed to stabilize. The stabilization, of course, included the growth of a new form of evil, fascism. It also lasted little more than a decade, collapsing into the deepest depression capitalism had

ever experienced. Deep as it was, it wasn't 'the end'--the system managed to survive. Yes, it survived in part due the economic stimulus produced by WW II (which was, at least in part, the playing out of the unfinished business of WW I). WW II itself could be viewed as a collapse into barbarism, if we take the word to mean an expression of the newest horrors committed by systems/nations/peoples against each other. But it was not barbarism in the form of the end of civilization, not hardly. A significantly stabilized



world emerged--with the USA ruling the roost--and a deep and sustained economic expansion took place for over three decades. Yes, it included the Cold War threat of nuclear weapons...but it didn't include nuclear war. And, uneven as it may be, it included advances against hunger, gains in democratic rights, etc., etc. I could go on and on (as could you), but I don't see where this gets you to where you claim it does. There is *not* a defined or known endpoint. I don't know if there will be a nuclear holocaust--and neither do you. I don't know how deep the climate change disasters will be before they are (or are not) addressed--and neither do you. Capitalism is unjust, and capitalism is unstable, and capitalism brings out the worst in people...but capitalism is not doomed (unless one is simply arguing that, sooner or later, most things change, and few things last forever).

Rod

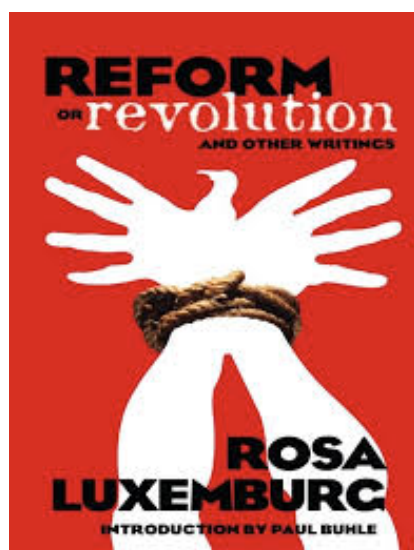
October 30

Rod,

There seem to be two possible meanings to your agnosticism about capitalism's future.

(1) Industrial capitalism will most probably go into decades at least of bad times, economic stagnation and crises, ecological disasters, greater wars, and other terrible developments.

But--contrary to anyone who thinks that this is necessarily the end of world capitalism, one way or another--the system may pull out of this. After decades of terrible mass suffering, it may return to an extended period (at least) of stability, prosperity, and sustainability, something like the post-WWII period (assuming no revolution).



(2) Or, we cannot know how bad things will get. Maybe there will be a drastic downturn and extended crisis, but maybe the capitalist class and its leadership will carry out realistic countermeasures in time. These reforms may save capitalism from its worst tendencies--***in the near future***--and in the next couple of decades may stabilize and maintain relative prosperity, ecological balance, and democracy. Who knows?

I could accept (1), although I find it unlikely, but not impossible. It implies a revolutionary perspective. I believe that (2) is extremely unlikely. As I pointed out, the restoration of post-war prosperity took the Great Depression, defeat of workers' struggles, Nazism and Stalinism, and a second world war, not to mention the looting of the environment. I do not see anything like this happening ***in the***

near future (probably not even in the long-run future, but certainly not in the near future). If I thought that this was possible to a realistic extent, then I would reject a revolutionary approach. (2) Implies a reformist perspective, if a militant one.

WP

October 31
Wayne,

Thanks for your further thoughts.

You say that there are two possible meanings to what you call my 'agnosticism' about capitalism's future. I will summarize your presentation of these two meanings and comment on them in a moment. But, first, I want to make clear that I believe that our difference is not over speculations about what capitalism will or won't do in the future, but rather centers on three questions: 1) Is holding a revolutionary outlook dependent on there being a known direction or outcome for capitalism? 2) Is believing that there is such a known direction or outcome a remnant of Marxism?, and, 3) Is such a worldview philosophically and practically totalitarian? I believe the answer to the first question is 'no,' and the answers to the second and third questions are 'yes.' Here is my summary of the two meanings you ascribe to what I wrote:

Meaning #1: *Capitalism will have crises, bad times, ecological disasters, wars, etc., but these crises do not necessarily spell the end of the system; capitalism has the capacity to survive, and may do so.* This part of your summary is a correct interpretation of my views. However, you also suggest that I predict *decades of terrible mass suffering, to be followed by extended stability.* This is not so. I make no prediction regarding the overall (longer-term) *timing, duration, or sequence* of capitalist crisis and stability, expansion and contraction, peace and war. I believe that capitalism has and will experience all these things (sometimes simultaneously, depending on what sphere we are looking at). While it is true that we can (attempt to) make shorter-term prognostications,

there is no 'grand' or 'determined' direction or outcome at work.



Meaning #2: *We cannot know how bad things can get, and reforms and stabilization are possible, even over the next couple of decades.* This is a correct summary, as far as it goes. (It flows from the clarification I made to your first meaning--I am not predicting capitalism will follow any specified path.) However, I would add to this second meaning that I don't think meanings #1 and #2 are counter-posed; saying that reforms and stabilization are possible (for varying periods of times, in varying spheres of economic, political and social life, in varying parts of the world) does not mean that capitalism will not also experience crises of varying severity, and inflict inhuman suffering in myriad forms on millions and millions of people. It does so today, has done so throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and is overwhelmingly likely to do so in the future.

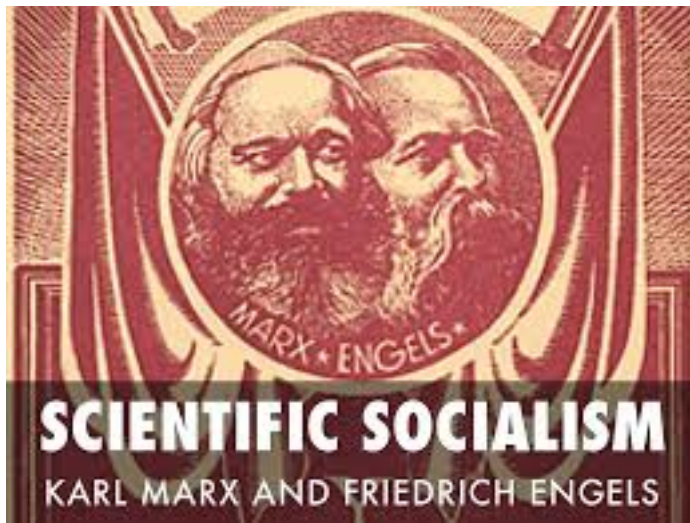


You believe (and state) that meaning #1 'implies a revolutionary perspective.' In contrast, you believe (and state) that meaning #2 "implies a reformist perspective.' And you say, "If I thought that this (stabilization in the near future--RM) was possible to a realistic extent, then I would reject a revolutionary approach."

This is the crux of our disagreement. I don't think it is putting words in your mouth to say that you believe that only if capitalism is 'doomed,' only if it will (inevitably) destroy our entire civilization, should one be a revolutionary. In contrast, you argue that if capitalism is *not* headed for complete collapse (and if socialism is not its 'scientific successor')...one should be a reformist. This flows from the way you have parsed the two 'meanings' and the conclusions you have drawn about them, as stated in the paragraph above.

I can't prove it, but I think you are standing matters on their head, by which I mean it is not an empirical analysis of capitalism that leads you to your conclusions about its course, but rather your desire to maintain a revolutionary outlook that leads you to your analysis. It was comforting (in a somewhat perverse sense), when we were Marxists, to be able to believe that 'history' was on 'our side,' that capitalism almost certainly spelled 'final doom' for the world, that socialism was immanent within capitalism, and, therefore, a revolutionary perspective was...'logical' ('true,' 'on the side of history,' etc.) Comforting or not, I have come to agree that

this is a false perspective, and--worse--one with totalitarian implications and outcomes.



I believe that what the empirical evidence actually suggests is that capitalism will continue to have economic crises, environmental crises, wars, exploitation, inequality, degradation and more. I have no need to 'quantify' the horrors, just as I don't want to debate who was worse, Stalin or Hitler, or who is more exploited, this group or that. I also think that there is plenty of evidence to suggest that the entrenched power and privilege of the ruling elites, the oppressive and controlling role of the state, and the domination of countless levers of subtle and subtle control by the wealthy make reform of capitalism, particularly electoral reform, extremely unlikely (and all the more so, if one rejects a supposedly-benevolent Big-Brother state as liberating outcome.)



This leaves me believing that capitalism is evil, that people from time to time display a cooperative side that is suggestive of a vastly alternative set of values, operating principles, mechanisms and beliefs, and that it would be good if people decided some day to put an end to the current deal. Such a development would almost certainly have to arise in the context of deep, consciousness-raising and unifying struggles, and it would seem that we are a very long distance from being able to point to any markers that suggest such a course is either imminent or perhaps even likely.

This brings me back to the start of this discussion. I think that you are trying to cobble a *non-Marxist* (revolutionary anarchist/libertarian socialist) view that a future society such as we hope for can only come about through the conscious, independent, collective, local, 'free will' actions of the majority of people, to a *decidedly Marxist* view that such consciousness and action is 'necessary' (found within 'history' and scientifically true) because it is intrinsically contained within capitalism. I think this is: a) false; and, b) lets the wolf in the door.

Rod

November 21

Rod,

I do not wish to make a lengthy comment. However, let me respond to your charge that I am "trying to have it both ways." Of course I am. That is, I start from a dynamic interaction of fact and value. It is meaningless to have values, such as a vision of an anti-authoritarian socialism, if we don't think they could be realized. Otherwise they are just a variety of religion or perhaps art. Or, put another way, if we commit to a moral vision, we must then analyze what aspects of social reality trend in the direction we want and which don't. (For example, the process of



capitalist production pushes the modern working class toward socialism, while the better off workers tend to be more conservative and the worse-off tend to be demoralized and overwhelmed.) Or we could start from the suffering and felt oppressions of the existing society and work out what could be a moral alternative. Whether this shows a Marxist influence is of no concern to me.

Wayne

November 23
Wayne,

I don't know if anti-authoritarian socialism can be realized, and, I would argue, neither do you. I don't think it is meaningless for me to believe that the current system (which we label capitalism) is an oppressive horror, and that, one day, enough people might wish to live in a fundamentally different arrangement (which I label revolutionary democratic

socialism). I think this view is hopeful, optimistic...even utopian, but not meaningless.



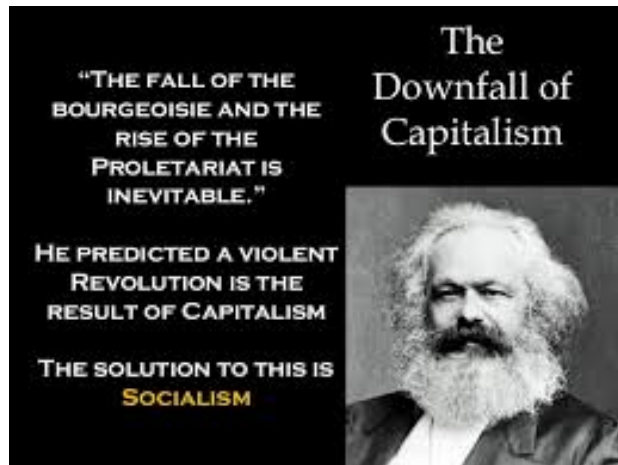
My view *does* start from the suffering and oppression of the existing society and posits an ethical alternative that flows from my own beliefs and values. In other words, it is an ethically driven vision, a preference based on free will. In this sense, it *is* akin to art and religion. It is much less akin to science.

You say that we must analyze "what aspects of social reality trend in the direction we want and which don't." You then posit, "The process of capitalist production pushes the modern working class toward socialism." Would it were so, but I think this is a wish on your part, rather than a fact. Capitalist production (and the entire set of economic/social/political relations attendant to capitalism) pushes working and oppressed people in myriad directions--toward struggles against exploitation and oppression and toward accommodation; toward progressive, and sometimes even, revolutionary ideas, and toward conservative, and sometimes even, highly reactionary ideas; toward capitalism, state capitalism, fascism, and, sometimes, toward something that you and I might consider socialism. To assert a clearer 'line of march' is, in my view, wishful thinking.

Lastly, you say that whether your views show a Marxist influence is of no concern to you. Let me say clearly that I

don't believe that because a given belief coincides with Marxist doctrine, it somehow becomes 'wrong.' But if beliefs flow less from objective reality, than from Marx's mistaken notion that capitalism was creating a class that *inherently and inevitably* would overthrow capitalism and create socialism, Marxist influence becomes a matter of concern.

Rod



November 24
Rod,

(1) I don't know if anti-authoritarian socialism can be realized, you say. No, I have no absolute knowledge. But after reading a great deal about *possible* alternate societies, I have come to the conclusion that anti-authoritarian socialism could *probably* work. (I still remember my excitement in reading Paul Goodman and Lewis Mumford who gave evidence and reasons for believing that a decentralized society *could* work with a modern technology.) If I thought that this was only a vision that would *probably* not function, I certainly would not advocate it.

(2) Your starting point seems to be that capitalism "is an oppressive horror." This is both a moral judgment and an objective one (that there is a system and that it is oppressive and horrible). A fine beginning!

(3) However, this is not enough. Do we conclude that this oppressive, horrible system can *probably* be gradually altered over time to become significantly less oppressive and horrible (If not perfect--we will never have perfect)? Or do we think that the system can *probably* not be reformed and therefore should be overturned? This requires an objective, analysis of the workings of the society. It should be as close to "science" as we can get with social institutions. Since you say you are for revolutionary democratic socialism (a term I last read in Hal Draper), I assume you have made such an analysis and concluded that a revolution is (probably) needed to fulfill your moral goals.

(4) As you know from the specific text I last sent you, I do not believe "that capitalism was creating a class that *inherently and inevitably* would overthrow capitalism and create socialism," whether or not Marx actually believed such a thing (which is not as clear as you think). I distinctly wrote that capitalism pushed workers in the direction of a socialist revolution but also created countervailing tendencies (high wages for some, extremely bad conditions for others, for example.) I am aware, like you, that the working class has not created socialism--under the banner of either Marxism or anarchism or democratic socialism--and may not before there is an end to society.

(5) Nevertheless, unlike you, I continue to be committed to working class revolution. That is, I think that ***the people organized in their capacity as workers and part of the working class*** may *possibly* make a revolution (that is, play an essential role in a revolution along with others).

Considering that their horrible oppressions are mostly connected to capitalism--considering that most people are nonsupervisory workers or their dependents (whatever else they are)--considering that they have a strategic advantage in that they have their hands on the means of production, transportation, communication, and services--considering that the ranks of the armed



forces are mostly their daughters and sons--I conclude that ***if the working class doesn't play a key role in the revolution, then there is no one else who will.***

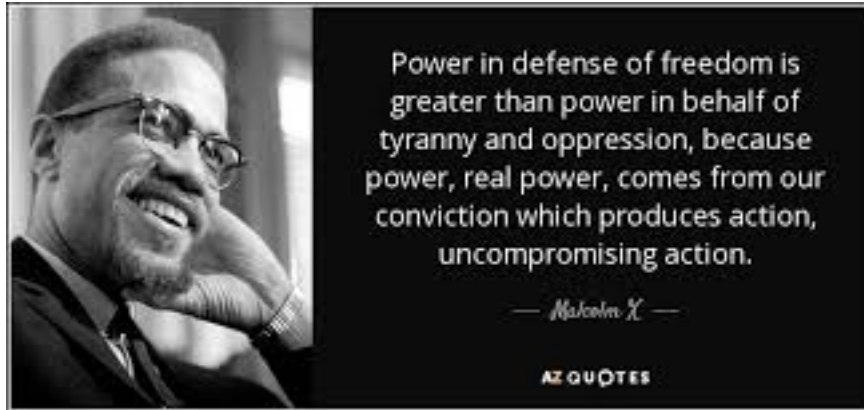
Solidarity,
Wayne

November 25
Wayne,

A few comments, and then I will let you have the last word:

1) We both agree that there is no certainty that anti--authoritarian socialism can be realized. We both believe it is possible, and we both choose to advocate it. You may prefer the word probable to possible, but I don't think a debate over this has meaning.

2) We both agree that the recognition that capitalism is a 'horror' is, as you say, 'a fine beginning' (even if a horrible one).



3) I believe that revolution is probably needed to achieve anti-authoritarian socialism (which is why I describe myself as a revolutionary democratic socialist). Although I believe a revolution to overthrow capitalism is desirable and possible, this is not the same as saying it *will* happen--which brings us back to impossible, possible, probable, and certain. I reject certain at one end, and impossible at the other; I have no interest in slicing possible vs. probable (vs. remotely possible, mildly possible, very possible, probable, likely, highly likely, etc.). There is no science to a choice among these words--which one chooses is a matter of personal outlook and predilection (i.e., it is more art than science.)

4) You wrote that "*the process of capitalist production pushes workers in the direction of socialist revolution.*" You are right that you did not say that capitalism creates a class that 'inherently and inevitably' will overthrow capitalism and create socialism; I apologize if I distorted your meaning. But I don't believe your intended meaning was/is that capitalism merely pushes workers in various directions (in which case, it does not push them in any one direction, i.e., socialism).

Rather, I believe your meaning was/is that capitalism pushes workers toward socialism (even if you recognize that there are 'some countervailing tendencies'). If this latter interpretation is your intended meaning, then we are right back where we started--I reject the idea that socialism is *immanent in capitalism (or history)*, or that the working class is 'impelled' toward socialism because of the dynamics of capitalism. I also reject your corollary idea (the last sentence of point #4) that if the working class doesn't make a socialist revolution there

will be an "end to society." (This, of course, is the notion of 'socialism or barbarism' in slightly different words.) The idea that there is a binary choice (socialism or the end of society) rests on the same assumption--that there is a *known course of history* (in this case, the course of capitalist history), with a *known outcome*. I believe that capitalism may continue for centuries; sooner or later, it may evolve into forms that we cannot know or predict (which might include some form of socialism). The counter-posed notion that there is *one* specific direction (socialism) and one specific alternative to socialism (the end of society/barbarism) is Marxist-derived...and wrong.



5) You say that you are committed to working class revolution--and that I am not. I am not sure where this comes from. I believe it will likely take a revolution to overthrow capitalism and create an alternative society. I believe that democratic socialism (or anti-authoritarian socialism, or libertarian socialism, or anarchism--pick your label) can only be created if the overwhelming majority of people consciously determine and act to do so. I believe that the overwhelming majority of people in our society (and the world) are workers--that is to say, people who do not own or control the means of production, but rather labor for those who do. Among this overwhelming majority are many, many people who are oppressed in ways additional to their exploitation as laborers (people of color, women, LGBT people, etc.) Taken as whole, these are the people who might recognize a stake and interest in replacing capitalism with a cooperative, democratic, 'social' (rather than privately-owned)

system--socialism. These working and oppressed people have diverse skills, experiences and knowledge, all of which are forms of power. Included among them, importantly, are people who have an additional form of power that derives from their concentration in large numbers (factories and other large workplaces), their ability to form associations (unions), and their ability to act in concert to halt production/transportation/communication. This power can strengthen any movement immeasurably, and would likely be a critical part of any movement that developed the consciousness and desire-- the will--to overthrow capitalism. You will have to let me know where we agree or disagree regarding this last point.

Rod

November 26

Rod,

You may have the "last word," except that I take back my charge that you no longer believe in a working class revolution, which was an oversimplification on my part.

Wayne
