

Review: Socialism Taken Seriously

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***Taking Socialism Seriously*. Anatole Anton and Richard Schmitt, eds.. Lexington Books, 2012, 276 pages, \$90 cloth.**

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AS THE CAPITALIST crisis rages and inequality continues to soar, fewer and fewer people are satisfied with the status quo. But the powerful ideology of “There Is No Alternative” (TINA) has constrained many people’s political imagination and consigned them to political apathy; our task as socialists is to convince them that there is, indeed, an alternative to capitalism.

But what exactly is an alternative to capitalism? When we talk of “socialism,” what does it actually mean? *Taking Socialism Seriously*, edited by Anatole Anton and Richard Schmitt, raises questions on what socialism concretely is and how we can get there, and examines these questions in detail while eschewing fantasies and wishful thinking.

Such a political and intellectual project is particularly timely in today’s political context, which is characterized by the dysfunctions of capitalism and simmering discontent with the status quo, but is yet to see radical, organized opposition to capitalism. Socialism as an idea has gained popularity, at least as a concept; among the Millennials, “socialism” is now seen more positively than “capitalism.” (Pew Research Center 2011) [[1](#)]

The Occupy movement organized the greatest radical movement in recent memory, it could possibly have persisted longer with a convincing, coherent vision of an alternative to capitalist economy. In such a political environment, *Taking Socialism Seriously* offers an important and useful contribution.

Schmitt’s thought-provoking opening chapter outlines 25 wide-ranging questions on socialism, offering a useful starting point for the discussions. It begins with the question of what is meant by “socialism” — in particular, if it is a “mode of production” distinct from capitalism. (3)

Questions on mechanisms of a socialist society include the character and extent of market and competition, the role of the coercive state (or lack thereof), and the nature of democracy in socialism: what democracy means in socialism, how exactly investments are to be controlled democratically, and how democracy is to be protected against the power of bureaucracy, experts and mass media.

Another set of questions concerns the effects of socialism: Will socialism bring — or is it at least

more conducive to — the end of alienation and commodification, sexism and racism, environmental degradation, militarism and nationalism? Then there exist questions on transition: whether socialism should be pursued through “building mass movements to gain power for transforming the entire economy,” or through “building alternative institutions locally;” and what can activists do now to promote socialism, when its immediate prospects are remote? (8)

Problems of “Mixed” Economy

A conception of a viable socialist political economy is a necessary centerpiece for “taking socialism seriously.” David Schweickart outlines such a vision in his chapter “But What Is Your Alternative?”

Schweickart defines socialism as a “balanced mix” of market competition and cooperation, based on democratic control of investment and workplace democracy based on co-operative labor, but combined with competitive market for goods and services. In his schema, private enterprises exist but are owned by workers who can democratically determine its operations. The workers nonetheless face the incentive to “work diligently and efficiently,” because their “income is tied directly to the performance of the firm.” (55)

Shweickart also allows for “entrepreneurs” who are necessary for technological innovation, and these entrepreneurial businesses would not even need to be run democratically, so long as they cannot be inherited or sold to other entrepreneurs.

These enterprises should not “pose a serious threat to a society in which democratic workplaces are predominant” because they would have to compete with democratic firms for workers, as long as the latter have an equal access to public investment funds. (57)

But if capitalist firms are more efficient and profitable than democratic firms — not least because of exploitation in the former! — democratic firms would then be compelled by market forces to compete with them; and especially if those workers in democratically run firms would be dependent on them for their livelihood (i.e. in the absence of universal basic income at the “livable” level), they would lose meaningful democratic control over their workplace.

The distinction between “incentive” and compulsion, between competition for innovation and competition leading to intensification of the labor process, can be thin. Furthermore, without near-total taxation of profits that would ensure public control of investment funds, entrepreneurial firms would expand through the market mechanisms and pose threats to the entire socialist system. Such taxes, however, can contradict the purpose of “incentives for innovation.”

Tony Smith also engages with the question of socialist political economy, in his critical engagement with Yochai Benkler’s theory of commons-based peer production. Benkler argues that the information economy represents a rise of a “new mode of production,” as “ownership of the characteristic means of production of the networked information age is widely dispersed,” in the form of cheap computing powers. (158-159)

Benkler argues that such a “new mode of production” is emerging from within the existing capitalist order, and can flourish alongside the capitalist sectors, as long as powerful incumbents’ interests are not prioritized through intellectual property regimes. (164)

From a socialist perspective, Smith convincingly refutes Benkler’s argument; as workers would still be dependent upon capital for livelihood in an economy with peer production, peer production can in reality only be utterly subordinated to the capitalist sector. Furthermore, as long as capitalism

reigns, the fruits of technological advances will be turned against the working class.

Smith argues that commons-based peer production can fully realize its emancipatory potential if it is incorporated as part of socialism, “extending *throughout* production and distribution processes.” He includes democratic control of workplaces and investment, as well as public sharing of scientific-technological knowledge, as necessary part of socialism. (179, emphasis original)

Socialism, the Very Idea

Discussions of an institutional blueprint for socialism, however, inevitably depend on what is meant by “socialism” in the first place. Richard Schmitt provides his own answer, in the chapter “Beyond Capitalism and Socialism.” Because of the collapse of the claim to inevitability of socialism, we must deconstruct the binary of “capitalism” and “socialism,” adopting a more malleable conception of both. (188) While socialism is not inevitable, capitalism is not so totalizing as to require total overthrow, because capitalism is merely “one of many systems in this society” (194, emphasis original).

The capitalist logic of production for profit has not eradicated non-profit logics of production, such as household and cooperative production (i.e. “from editing your friend’s manuscript to getting together to help friends to erect their yurt”). Therefore, Schmitt argues, “the logic of capital, far from dictating the laws of movement in every area of social development, is itself contingent, since it depends on processes and transformation which escape its control.” (195)

Schmitt invokes feminist and anti-racist critiques — that capitalism depends on domestic labor, and that feminist and anti-racist struggles should not be subordinated to class struggles — in order to bolster the claim of contingency; that “the capitalist mode of production is not the central organizing force of society,” and that there is no “central mechanism” of society at all. (193)

While it is very tempting to believe that the capitalist logic is not as unassailable as often thought to be, Schmitt’s discussions of contingency of social forces in capitalism leave much to be desired.

Rejecting a deterministic prediction of capitalism’s collapse is hardly a reason to claim that there exist many social phenomena in capitalist society that “are not part of capitalism at all” (193) — considering that the overwhelming majority of the workers are dependent on private capital for their livelihood, and the capitalist sector always tends to grow at the expense of the alternative economy.

That a socialist revolution does not on its own eradicate patriarchy and racism does not imply that co-ops, local currencies, churches and voluntary associations can be the promising institutional bases to undermine the dominant capitalist logics, as Schmitt would have it. (196)

Capital’s dependence on socially reproductive unpaid labor does not contradict the overwhelming dominance of the capitalist logic. As Ann Ferguson argues in her thought-provoking chapter “Romantic Couple Love, the Affective Economy, and a Socialist-Feminist Vision,” overcoming capitalism is necessary (although not sufficient) in order to abolish gendered exploitation of socially reproductive (and particularly affective) labor.

In particular, while embracing feminist goals of the social democratic welfare states, she contends that full realization of feminist organization of care labor is impossible within capitalism. Ferguson’s piece eloquently describes the possibilities of empowering “affective economies,” in which each of us will gain control over our own love energies and extend solidarity love, once the capitalist fetters are removed. (70)

Getting There

What are the concrete strategies to move towards socialism? John Hammond, in “Social Movements and Strategies for Socialism,” explores political strategies for socialism and what is to be done in the shorter term.

He suggests that social movements have four kinds of effects — empowerment of activists, prefiguration of emancipatory social relations, broader cultural shifts, and impact on public policies. (219) He offers useful discussions on each of the kinds of changes a movement can make.

Hammond is rather unspecific, however, about what socialism is, except as “the fulfillment of very general values: equality, freedom, justice, and solidarity,” and seems to encompass all kinds of social movements as “socialist” strategies. (214)

Schweickart and Schmitt focus more particularly on concrete and convincing strategies based on their conception of socialism, such as nationalization of the banking system and public works programs. However, their shorter-term strategies tend to be prefigurative, such as the Employee Stock Ownership Plans and “replace[ment of] for-profit enterprises by others aiming at social improvement,” with a specific focus on building “the alternative institutions of the social economy [that can] . . . provide us with settings in which we can be the best people we are capable of being.” (204)

I suggest that prefigurative politics must be connected to a credible, feasible strategy for broader transformation; worker control of production during the Portuguese Revolution of 1974-75 is, therefore, qualitatively different from creating small co-operatives or stock options for employees. (226)

Furthermore, we cannot escape the problem of organization and political parties in order to achieve broader transformations. Hammond argues that a political party, due to “too much organization,” has become inactive and merely about “writing checks.” (215) Even if this has become true of most political parties today, the question is how to create a party that is also a movement.

Indeed, Hammond himself acknowledges the central role that political parties played in achieving larger-scale reforms, such as the universalist welfare states in Scandinavia and participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

In 2000, having experienced two decades of neoliberal onslaught, Perry Anderson wrote: “The only starting-point for a realistic Left today is a lucid registration of historical defeat. Capital has comprehensively beaten back all threats to its rule, the bases of whose power... were persistently under-estimated by the socialist movement.” [2]

Despite the promising emergence of movements in various parts of the world over the past few years, the possibility of overcoming capitalism indeed remains rather remote. However, imagining a socialist society is important even in such a political environment, in order to demonstrate that capitalism is not a natural and unchangeable system of “the economy,” both to our anti-capitalist comrades and to all workers who are oppressed under capitalism.

Taking Socialism Seriously indeed engages with these questions that must be significant for all of us seeking to build the world without oppression and exploitation. Such an analysis however, needs to squarely confront the contradictions and obstacles that such a political project faces, without comforting illusions about the forces of global capitalism facing us today.

P.S.

* Against The Current 174, January/February 2015. <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>

Footnotes

[1] Pew Research Center. Dec 28, 2011. "Little Change in Public's Response to 'Capitalism,' 'Socialism: a Political Rhetoric Test."
(<http://www.people-press.org/2011/12/28/little-change-in-publics-response-to-capitalism-socialism/>) Accessed Sept. 15, 2014. In light of this survey, Schmitt's claim that "socialism" is seen as an authoritarian centralist system may gradually change for the better, as the Millennials and younger generations do not have any living memory of the Soviet Union, and may be most familiar with the term as an insult deployed by the far right.

[2] Perry Anderson. 2000. "Renewals," New Left Review 1, 1-20. 19.