

# **SOCIALISM AND THE COMMON GOOD**

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**New Fabian  
Essays**

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**Edited by  
Preston King**

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AND THE  
COMMON GOOD

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New Fabian Essays

Edited by  
PRESTON KING

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# Preface

This book brings together a set of writings by some of the leading social and political thinkers at work in Britain today. Its object is to place before the public some seminal discussions of what is largely a single theoretical issue, together with its practical ramifications: the role of the state, from a socialist perspective, in achieving the common good, or social justice, in modern market systems.

These essays raise many questions. Is state ownership essential to the common good, or is it only one among other theoretically feasible means of securing social justice? Is state ownership an exclusively socialist project, or is it equally a characteristic of conservative policy, in conditions of electoral competition and majority rule? Can a rationalist and egoistic contractualism serve as an adequate model for modern society, or is it at bottom descriptively inept and morally anaemic? Is communitarianism a threat to civil liberty in social democratic states, or is it a necessary condition for efficacy and fairness? How far should the citizen's community of allegiance extend? Up to the borders of his/her class? Nation? State? Beyond? And on what grounds? The authors of these essays reflect a variety of responses: they follow no single line. But they are remarkably uniform in their rejection of the cult of choice and of rational egoism, and in their promotion of a more robust and inclusive notion of community and of social responsibility.

It is commonly claimed that socialism is one or a set of social movements that basically originated in a positive concern to promote the common ownership of property. It is not so commonly recognised that it arose from something simpler and more negative: repudiation of the character and consequences of monopolistic private ownership and control. Where socialism is identified with the positive quest for common ownership, the question that arises is whether the theorem of public ownership can only be legitimately satisfied by direct and active state control, or equally legitimately by various less-engaged forms of arms-length, state regulation. A parallel question that arises is



whether common ownership is better read as a part of the *meaning* of social justice, or by contrast as only one among other theoretically possible *means* to achieving the common good. This debate has been sharpened by the extraordinary celebration of market principles – which has largely meant both protecting and deepening the inequities of the market – since the first Thatcher government in 1979, and the first Reagan administration in 1980.

There are some who place the very highest value upon egalitarian community – upon strong individual identity grounded in a rough equality of social, economic and political condition. By contrast, many of the same individuals contend that common ownership, as a means to such a community, issues in state monopoly; and they conclude that this, if too encompassing, is not only inefficient, but also undermines the very equality of condition which common ownership was originally intended to secure. The historical record is rather complex – for, while many socialists have been strong advocates of state ownership, many others (such as P.-J. Proudhon and Eduard Bernstein) have firmly promoted forms of private ownership. What is reflected in this volume is the importance both of community and individuality, and of the need for a better balance between them – in the interest of the common good and social justice.

Most of these essays were discussed by members of the Socialist Philosophy Group (SPG) of the Fabian Society in the period since 1990, either in their original or in modified form. Over half of them are entirely new and are published here for the first time, including the three opening chapters of Part One. Virtually all date from the period since 1990 (over the time that I served as Convenor of the SPG in succession to my colleague, Brian Barry). Two of these essays (Barry and Plant) were earlier published as independent tracts by the Fabian Society, but their limited circulation fully warrants republication. Three others (Hollis, Hampsher-Monk and Cohen) have been published elsewhere, and one of these (Cohen) is reproduced here in abbreviated form. The papers comprising Part Four have not been published hitherto. All of the authors, save one (Plant), have been cumulatively involved in some or all of these discussions, and most of the paper-writers have been influenced in some degree and fashion by the positions staked out by their colleagues and friends. The writers have been guided by no brief, but their essays do seem to establish a pretty coherent, but of course, pluralistic, coherence.

I take this opportunity to thank collectively the contributors, both

for their essays, and for the re-direction of the royalties from these to the Fabian Society, which has sponsored and promoted this volume. Thanks are due to Simon Crine and to Giles Wright of the society for the support they have given throughout for the SPG meetings in Dartmouth Street and elsewhere. I should also like to note the helpful contributions of – among many others – Tony Beck, Geoffrey Bindman, John Carrier, John Champneys, Robin Cohen, Diana Coole, Nicholas Deakin, G. M. Dillon, David Donnison, James Doyle, Barbara Goodwin, Roger Hadley, Patricia Hewitt, Patricia Hollis, Paul Hirst, Ann Holmes, Sally Jenkinson, Ian Kendall, Kelvin Knight, R. D. McKinlay, Charles Marquand, David Marquand, Liam O’Sullivan, Anne Phillips, Alan Playdell, Margherita Rendel, L. J. Sharpe, Raewyn Stone, Sally Tomlinson and Peter Wilkin.

Preston King  
Auckland, 27 January 1995

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# Introduction

PRESTON KING

This book supplies a set of essays on overlapping problems of contemporary political and social philosophy. A number of themes criss-cross throughout, such as individualism, communitarianism and collectivism; the common good, common ownership and social justice, rational egoism, friendship and citizenship, identity, constituency and local government, incentives, entitlements and obligations. Underlying all these is the central concern with socialism: its distinctiveness, its ends, means, community of inclusion, and most importantly its relation, not so much to capitalism, but to the market, the profit-motive, and to rational egoism. These papers appear fairly consistent both in their acceptance of the market and equally of the need to constrain it. Where writers of an earlier era – Bodin, Hobbes, Spinoza, Kant – used to celebrate the State, attributing to it an unquestionable autonomy and supremacy, so many writers of our own age – Hayek, Friedman, Nozick – have been disposed to celebrate the Market, attributing to it a similarly magical autonomy and independence. These papers demonstrate sophisticated evolution well beyond both such false enthusiasms, and will contribute significantly to the evolution of a vibrant social democracy appropriate to our age.

## *Part one: principles and constituencies*

The first three essays of the volume are introductory and tend to concentrate upon choice, constituency and the question of common ownership.

Anthony Arblaster, author of the opening paper, is troubled by the question of choice, and by implication with the distinguishing features of socialism. He argues that all socialisms, Fabian or communist, belong to the same current of thought and owe a debt to Marx. He contends that socialism is a communitarian movement whose *raison*

*d'être* was and is to check the rampant social atomisation produced by capitalism. Arblaster believes that every society must project a common good – placing a limit on the extent of its pluralism or tolerance. He accepts the importance of freedom, but believes that the promotion of competition and 'the cult of choice' in recent times has been carried much too far: competition, for example in the choice of doctors, hospitals and schools, merely has the effect of ensuring that those who are most disadvantaged will be further disadvantaged. Arblaster takes it that some compulsory practices, like universal health insurance and pension arrangements, are actually better than parallel non-compulsory schemes. He does not perceive the position of the individual as necessarily improved just because government leaves him or her more money in take-home pay. Lower taxes may mean less adequate social provision – as in transport or parks or education or museums. While Arblaster accepts the legitimacy of some communitarian claims, he does not nominate and need not intend that public ownership (that is, nationalisation) is the sole or even predominant means of achieving the common good which he seeks.

Where Arblaster never directly refers to common ownership, this is L. J. Macfarlane's exclusive concern. He traces this idea from Aristophanes and Plato right up to the present. His concern is to show not only that the notion of common ownership is not a new idea, but also that it comes in several distinct varieties. It may be restricted to a particular class; or merely consist of radical redistribution from rich individuals/classes to poor individuals/classes; or apply to some sectors of the economy, not all; or be driven by conflicting purposes – perhaps to make a conservative government more stable (by attracting popular support), equally perhaps to remove constraints on the emergence of excellence, et cetera. Two contrary hints are contained in Macfarlane's analysis. The first is that socialism is nothing without common ownership and that it abandons its soul in abandoning this strategy. The second, however, is that common ownership (as for Bismarck) in no way necessarily furthers the objective of a socialist morality. Arblaster's strategy is to begin with the common good as an end. Macfarlane's strategy is to begin with common ownership as a standard mechanism or means. Because this mechanism of common ownership is not distinctive – being appropriated both by socialists and non-socialists – Macfarlane, I think, is in turn implicitly forced back upon some notion of a socialist morality – that is, back upon a more abstract and comprehensive concern with the common good.

In the third paper I argue that it is a piece of misdirection to attempt to distinguish between socialist and conservative parties in terms of the volume of choice that each will allow or deny. For every communist Rumania or Albania there are very many more capitalist Germanies (Hitler), or Zaires (Mobutu) or Nicaraguas (Somoza). This paper argues that choice is always in any setting circumscribed; that each choice taken must close the door on some other that might have been; that each choice refused, of itself opens up fresh possibilities. This paper contends that governments do not enhance choice as such, but are only able to supply better or worse options; thus governments are not to be judged on the number, but on the quality, of the choices they allow. Choice is only the ground of morality; it cannot be its object. Markets are no more to be identified with freedom than are states; they create some possibilities, but always at the cost of killing off others.

The paper argues that the distinction between socialism and conservatism, whatever else it may be, is not a matter of one standing for monopoly and the other for competition. If government is itself a species of monopoly, and if all parties sanction government – as they appear to do by competing to win it – then in this they also all sanction some form and degree of monopoly. The appropriate question accordingly is not whether or not there should be monopoly, but rather what are the appropriate techniques for regulating it (oversight), and how far should we allow it to extend (limits). The state is of course dangerous. But then so is the market. And they are not always distinguishable. The market is not a mere collection of individuals, any more than is the state. The bulk of the market consists of giant private collectives. Some private collectives (General Motors, Sony) are infinitely more powerful than most public collectives (Bahamas, Nepal). If we are concerned to curb the one, it is inconsistent to omit constraints on the other. In any event, it is argued, the Right proves itself to be only rhetorically, not practically, opposed to government – even big government. The Right only perceives its elaborate use of government as ‘natural’, while recourse to government by opponents is ‘tyranny’.

How far then should government monopoly extend? Government itself, in one form or another, is always with us. The tasks it sets itself are constantly evolving. The question whether government should nationalise the economy wholesale is not on the agenda. But it is suggested that some theoretical light may be thrown on this question

by at least distinguishing between ownership and management, and between management and regulation. By cross-mapping ownership and management, the conclusion is reached that the only really common feature of socialists is their firm opposition to Monopolistic Private Ownership and its consequences. In response to the claim that it is highly damaging to socialism to remove from it doctrinal support for Centralised Public Ownership, the paper observes that too much attention may be paid to formal doctrine, and not enough to live constituencies.

### *Part two: collectivism and markets*

The next three essays are more detailed and focus more narrowly on problems of collectivism and the market.

Brian Barry, like Arblaster, is suspicious of the cult of choice. He cogently replaces, however, the notion of a common good with something larger: social justice. The common good of course always reduces to some sort of social norm. This might be liberty or equality, but neither works on its own, and justice is larger than either. So Barry settles for socialism as a combination of social justice and collectivism, the latter being a selective form of common ownership. Barry might have constructed social justice as the end of socialism, with collectivism as its means. But he does not directly say this. Moreover, he does build 'collectivism' into the very meaning of socialism, which may imply that collectivism is itself for him an end. In any event, Barry's collectivism clearly excludes any simple anti-individualism.

Barry carefully distinguishes between (a) individualism and holism, (b) individualism and solidarism, and (c) individualism and collectivism. Under (a), Barry accepts individualism as a methodological principle and rejects holism. Under (b), he takes *solidarism* to imply a natural obligation to provide for the welfare of all members/citizens, simply because they are members/citizens; he takes *individualism* to imply that obligation only arises if it is artificially or contractually entered into; and he ends by rejecting both as models of duty. Under (c), Barry treats individualism as either classic (the nightwatchman state) or as left liberal (the equality-of-opportunity state), contrasting both with collectivism, which means joint action, standardly through the state, to achieve common goals; and here he accepts collectivism and rejects individualism. Barry accepts as plainly true that markets must be controlled and in some cases replaced. He takes it that markets

betray no natural tendency to eliminate inequities along the lines of gender and race and otherwise. He also concludes that natural monopolies are best publicly owned, since in private hands there is no incentive to provide 'cheap and efficient service on standard terms to all'.

David Winter's paper constitutes a limited comment on Barry's, whose plea for methodological individualism he accepts. Winter, however, thinks the case of the New Right to be strongest, not in regard to the deficiency of *information* available to central planners, but in respect to inadequate *incentives* to central planners to respond to the interests of their citizens/clients. Winter does not believe that the behaviour of administrators is merely to be reduced to motives of self-interest. But he is chary of the idea that 'the man or the woman in Whitehall not only knows best but behaves best as well'. Winter insists that a centralised or collective system of health provision need not necessarily be either just or efficient, nor that decentralised or even private systems must necessarily be the reverse.

Winter is anxious to establish that collective provision cannot be viewed as *essential* to the socialist project. He thinks it cannot be essential at least for the reason – noted by Macfarlane – that it is not distinctive. Winter contends that the New Right prefers decentralised over centralised provision, and competitive over monopoly arrangements – always preferring of course to place monopolies in private hands where monopoly cannot otherwise be avoided. Winter extends the point by insisting that there is wide, cross-party acceptance of collective provision in most advanced industrial states, at least in such key sectors as education, health and transport, so that a collectivist programme, at least in these areas, must fail to set socialists apart from most other parties.

Raymond Plant directly accepts, with Hayek, that centralised planning is impossible and a threat to civil liberty. But he also accepts that the market can be managed or regulated in important ways – as by dispersing concentrations of capital, extracting from industry provisions for long-term training of the labour force, maintaining genuine competition and a plurality of economic institutions (including unions), policing the external effects of production (such as pollution), and in general by imposing upon the market a framework of civil responsibility. Within such regulatory limits, Plant accepts the value – or the common values – of a mixed economy. Indeed, he accepts the market, not as 'some amoral force', but as a part of a just society, as long as it is kept



under constraint and in the public interest. By implication he appears to favour some form of effective decentralisation, which is not only administrative but also economic. He seeks to move socialism from a class to a citizenship basis, and thus to create a common moral community between owners of capital and purveyors of labour. He urges the adoption of a comprehensive citizenship perspective, which he believes will allow movement beyond sectionalism, rigid defence of interest groups, and class war.

Plant takes the comprehensive notion of citizenship to go hand-in-hand with some form of individualism and freedom, as long as it is understood that any effective freedom must have a positive dimension, requiring 'a feasible collective programme' which will satisfy the needs of agency. For Plant, a needs-based policy is essential, and the costs of sustaining it are not to be viewed as open-ended. If the costs of defending positive freedoms (welfare rights) are open-ended, then they could not be distinguished in this from the costs of enforcing negative freedoms (civil rights). For *all* entitlements have and are constrained by costs. The trick is simply not to allow the costs of any rights to become open-ended, so as to avoid over-extending government, and attendant threats to liberty. A part of the solution to the problem of costs may be to link rights to duties. The citizen has a duty to pay tax, and taxation is coercive. There is no reason why the redistribution of tax *qua* welfare should not have a matching element of coercion – in the minimal sense that receipt of welfare may be conditional, in appropriate circumstances, on the preparedness of recipients to produce – that is, to work.

Plant accepts the Rawlsian principle that the basic goods of citizens 'are to be distributed as equally as possible unless a more unequal distribution would produce more resources for the worst off'. In short, he accepts the principle of incentives for the better off. This principle, at least in terms of its practical effects, is one with which Cohen will be found to experience serious difficulty.

### *Part three: the poverty of egoism*

The next three essays concentrate upon the logic of incentives and the morality and externalities of market arrangements.

Martin Hollis distinguishes between friendship, citizenship and, in effect, contract. Friendship is a loyalty which is not sullied by considerations of personal gain and is such that it may cut across allegiance

to the state. Citizenship is erected upon duties to the state but purged, as in the case of friendship, of cost-benefit calculations. Contractualism involves rational egoists establishing agreements solely on the basis of mutual gain. These are three distinct principles and it is conceivable that a society as a whole could take its lead from any one of them. What we remark in our own time is an excessive affection for contract. Contractualists will view welfare entitlements as benefits or rights and civic responsibilities as costs or duties. Hollis observes the peculiar difficulty that attends the attempt to explain, for example, British politics in terms of the contractualist, or consumerist, model. If citizens did comprehensively behave contractually (as consumers), which is to say that if they actually did insist on minimising the costs of their membership, then they should necessarily avoid or severely restrict any form of voluntary (unpaid) public service. A strictly self-interested consumerism simply leaves no room for such disinterested behaviour. And yet, local government in Britain is marked by the entry of thousands of individuals who serve without remuneration. There is an argument for local government – and democracy at the local level – being ultimately more important than the more distant variety located at Westminster. Hollis views this as enough to show that contractualist consumerism is not altogether the aptest model for civil society.

Neither is Iain Hampsher-Monk enamoured of the contractual or consumerist model of rational egoism. He is concerned with the way in which the model of rational egoism produces, as a norm, behaviour which it seeks to predict as a fact. Hampsher-Monk argues that, from a rational egoist's perspective, if one can inoculate oneself individually against infective disease, there can remain no justification for universal, publicly supported inoculation of everyone. Similarly, if the rational egoist can afford to buy his or her own bottled water, there can remain no justification for public subvention of potable water from the tap. And so on – with transport, radio, transport, radio, TV, etc. To rigidly pursue the strategy of rational egoism, one must attempt to reconstruct all public goods from – or reduce them to – the interactions of self-interested egoists, whose sole object is the pursuit of personal gain. It is clear enough that humans are not all like this. But it is easy enough in an association to inculcate such an 'ideal' of egoism as that to which members may be encouraged to conform.

Hampsher-Monk takes it that the strategy of rational egoism breaks down as a possible way of making sense of certain types of public good. He mentions group games, like football or hockey. But we could easily

add such other activities as participation in a choir or band or orchestra or theatrical play or Scottish reel or wedding or fete – where the goodness of the good precisely consists in the fact that it is jointly engaged and enjoyed. Hampsher-Monk, with Bernard Crick in mind, wants to extend such cases to the seminal circumstance of politics itself. Here, politics is fostered, not as something you do just for something you gain (for example, Lasswell's notorious 'Who Gets What, When, How'), but because it is a good whose goodness consists in the joint engagement and enjoyment. The point is not that the political hasn't its instrumental side. The point is that that is not its only side. The political, in short, is a form of activity which is not reducible to simple market relations. For Hampsher-Monk, though politics are not reducible to markets, they are threatened by them. Markets, despite advantages, are not benign. Unregulated, they threaten politics, and liberty itself. For the rational egoism which they feature has the effect of atomising populations and eroding social groupings – such as trades unions, voluntary associations, local government. So just as Hollis can see no way for rational egoism to account for vibrant and unremunerative local government, neither can Hampsher-Monk extract from it any Crick-like understanding of politics as an autonomous engagement.

Just as Hollis and Hampsher-Monk oppose contractarian theory, dipped as it is in rational egoism, with instrumental motives, so does Gerry Cohen. What appears common to all three essays is some form of commitment to community. For Cohen there are different types of community. That in which he displays the greatest interest is what he calls the justificatory community. This community is bound by common norms, capable of justifying policies on an interpersonal basis, irrespective of the unequal advantages that might mark the different classes, estates or fractions within that community. For there to be a justificatory community, following Cohen, there must also be a capacity for those who enjoy unequal benefit to justify the benefit to their fellows who are compelled to go without. Modern states basically pretend to be justificatory – that is, egalitarian – communities, featuring equality of consideration and respect for the Other, but they are rarely so.

Cohen finds that in advanced industrial states, the rich characteristically affect to share a justificatory community with the poor. The rich or their representatives commonly attempt to justify their advantage to their deprived fellows on the grounds that the lure of

excess wealth acts as an incentive for the rich to work harder – the consequence being greater product. Cohen sees in this mere pretence. He compares the condition of the rich to that of a kidnapper, who says to parents from whom he seeks to extort a ransom: children ought to be with their parents; I shall not return your child unless you pay me; so you ought to pay me. What is to be noted about this procedure is that the kidnapper treats himself as an impersonal force, not as a human agent. From the kidnapper's perspective, taken as a moral agent, the point cannot be that the parents ought to pay, but that the kidnapper ought not to be holding and threatening harm to the child in the first place.

Cohen suggests that the rich individual is in a similar position when he or she says, in effect, to the poor or unemployed or disabled: people ought to work hard; I shall work less hard if tax is not reduced from 60 per cent to 40 per cent; so you ought to vote for a lower tax. From the perspective of a justificatory community – where members stand on a footing of equality with one another and have a shared concern for their mutual well-being – the point cannot be that the poor ought to vote for a lower tax so as to encourage the rich to work, but that the rich ought not to think to withdraw their labour in circumstances where their needs are being perfectly comfortably met while the most elementary needs of so many of their distressed fellows are not. In this, I confess that I cannot adequately convey the richness of Cohen's argument. But it is distinctive in bringing to life the interpersonal implications of a normally impersonal account of incentives.

#### *Part four: the enrichment of identities*

The final essays focus upon the plasticity of citizenship and the diversity and complexity of identity within and beyond the boundaries of modern states.

Bhikhu Parekh reformulates the question of political obligation, so as to ask, not: Why should I obey the law?, but rather: What obligations do I incur by virtue of citizenship of my state? This is in part an exploration of identity, and of its extent and limits. Citizens have multiple obligations, of which the political is but one. How these obligations mesh is a complex matter, but certainly political obligation must be sensitised to respect parallel obligations – as to an agent's kin, religion, ethnic community, not to omit humanity in general. One's obligation to the state, Parekh argues, is not only to obey it, but also to

question it, and more than this, to disobey it – where appropriate. Parekh argues that one's obligations are not characteristically the result of a command or a contract but largely follow from one's elemental humanity. These obligations at least – if not one's citizenship – must be recognised to extend to the world at large.

We are citizens of states, but not only of states. We may have duties to states, yet certainly not to these alone. Just as our identities are more complex (multiple) than is often supposed, so might we expect states – which are a most significant feature of personal identity – to be less rigidly framed than is commonly the case. State boundaries are not normally open to question, being simply taken for granted. When we do seek to justify them, it is not uncommon to do so on grounds of nationality – that is, of the ethnic homogeneity of the folk residing within the territorial bounds of the state. Onora O'Neill draws it to our attention that we have little justification for this. She reminds us that every nation-state contains other nations – which is to say that it contains 'minorities' that are somehow culturally or otherwise distinct. The presence then of 'nationhood' neither explains nor legitimates the boundaries of virtually any state. For no state is as culturally homogeneous as all that, nor is it likely that a state could or should succeed in securing such homogeneity. When a nation seeks to form itself as a state, it always willy-nilly overleaps itself and ends up incorporating other nationals. When a state that is already formed has its contours contested by distinct and dissident national components (Kurds, Tutsis, Somalis, whoever), it reflexively resists the dissolution of the frontiers that seem to make it what it is. O'Neill is not dismissive of state boundaries. But she has no passion for them. She would be happy to see them drawn, like identities, in multiple ways, for multiple purposes.

The question of citizenship and national boundaries is a vexed one for modern socialists. Since socialists seek social justice, the question arises as to whom it is they seek this for. Is it only to be for those who happen to share the same national identity, or state boundaries? As David Winter remarks, if socialists only see their community of allegiance in terms of their nation or state, they will exclude from their collective concern all those other communities – producers of coffee in Brazil or cotton in Egypt or pyrethrum in Kenya – on whom their own well-being often exploitatively depends. Socialists may see themselves as such in two distinct ways: on the one side in terms of the principle of redistribution which they embrace; on the other, in terms

of the community of inclusion (and thus exclusion) they accommodate. To stress technique of organisation or redistribution does not of itself touch the question of exclusion/inclusion.

If the community of inclusion is limited to one's state, then just distribution or provision is sought only within its confines. This excludes consideration of just provision for those who lie beyond the territorial bounds of one's state, but who none the less enter crucially into, and are typically controlled by, the very same chain of production by which one is sustained nationally. Communities are not just structured nationally, but also internationally. This is not just a matter for world religions and dispersed kinsfolk. It is more vitally a matter of and for production itself, which has today entered into a thoroughly encompassing, global phase. We are left accordingly with two very important problems. The first has to do with what we are to understand by socialism – that is, the sorts of principles and techniques we think it to require. The second problem has to do with that raised by Parekh and O'Neill, but also by Winter: who is to be included and how? It is obvious that a crude socialist centralism or nationalisation or common ownership will prove inept. But we must also consider that an unduly restrictive socialist nationalism – which has nothing to do with a national socialism – will simply prove unjust.

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*Part One:*  
*Principles and Constituencies*



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# Socialism and the common good

ANTHONY ARBLASTER

It is striking how little reaction there has been in social democratic circles and parties to the sudden and, as far as I know, barely predicted, collapse of European communism and the Soviet Union. I am not referring so much to the pathetic failure of the British Labour Party to adjust its 'defence' or foreign policy to these momentous changes – it was only too typical of the Labour leadership to embrace nuclear weapons at exactly the historical moment which made them irrelevant – as to the lack of discussion about the meaning and implications of these historic events.

What this reflects, I suspect, is the belief or assumption that social democracy has nothing in common, politically or intellectually, with communism; or at least the determination that it should not *appear* to have anything in common with communism. The claim that 'what happens in Eastern Europe' – even when it is good news – 'has nothing to do with us' is one more way of distancing social democracy from communism and Marxism; and that has, of course, been a prime concern of social democrats since 1917, and especially since 1945. Thus the Italian socialist and social democratic parties always co-operated in operating the first rule of post-Fascist Italian politics, which is that the Italian Communist Party (PCI) should never be allowed to form part of a government, despite being for more than 40 years the country's second largest party. Better a coalition with the Christian Democrats than the Communists, no matter how moderate and constitutional the latter became.

Historically and intellectually, all this is mere pretence and pretension. All forms of socialism, even the most moderate and diluted, owe a debt to Marx and Marxism whether they like it or not.

Historically the split between revolutionaries and reformers represented the partition of a single stream, and it is one which has never in

fact been complete or absolute. I would be happy to support these assertions if it was thought necessary; but one need only look at the tone and style of *Fabian Essays* of 1889 to see how different were relations then between these gradualists and their revolutionary contemporaries such as William Morris, compared with the hostile and dogmatic feuding that developed in the period after 1917.

More important for my purposes is to note the *de facto* degree of mutual dependence which existed between social democracy and communism. On the one hand social democracy could be perceived as reassuringly moderate – a sensible middle way, avoiding both the excesses of modern capitalism as epitomised in the decay and violence of urban America, as well as the bureaucratised authoritarianism and inefficiency of communist regimes and economies. On the other hand, communism acted as a magnet, pulling the whole spectrum of politics to the Left, and compelling reformist parties in the capitalist world to devise policies which, they hoped, would undermine the appeal of communism by echoing its good points and abjuring its bad ones. It was also the case that the international role of the Soviet Union acted as a usually unacknowledged restraint upon the foreign interventions of the United States – so it was so much easier for the United States to make war on Iraq once it was sure that the Soviet Union would not obstruct such an enterprise. Now this pole of attraction and source of restraint has vanished, leaving the poor world dangerously exposed to American threats and interventions – as in Somalia – and leaving social democracy more isolated and vulnerable than it has been for many decades.

The insecurity of the Left within the capitalist democracies has been compounded by the coincidental revival of militant and merciless capitalism which dominated the 1980s in much of the West, and which has now been taken up with enthusiasm in the ex-communist countries of Eastern Europe, where the very word ‘socialism’ is likely to carry deeply negative overtones for a good many years to come.

None of this is meant to imply that the social and economic and political order which has now disintegrated into rubble *was* an embodiment of socialism, as it always suited the Right to assert. But it was a tribute to the power of the Cold War ethos that most of the Western Left was afraid to admit that those societies had *any* socialist virtues at all, or that the Soviet Union played any positive role in international politics. But now these things *can* be admitted, and are, in some quite surprising quarters;<sup>1</sup> and we can see that the collapse of

communist authoritarianism, welcome as this was in itself, has not turned out to be an unmixed blessing, nor a prelude to unmixed blessings either.

Intellectually its impact in the Western world has been dreadful. We have been told yet again that 'Marxism is dead' by all kinds of people who had never willingly conceded that it was alive. And the corollary of this is the claim that 'we are all liberals now', and even that liberal capitalist democracy is the final political and economic goal to which all human history has been leading. The revival of liberal economics from the mid-1970s onwards has now been compounded by the proclaimed victory of capitalism over communism, or liberal democracy over socialist dictatorship. Given all that, given the particularly acute problems of the British Labour Party, which many people have argued, perhaps correctly, for more than a decade, is in long-term decline; given the general tendency of social democracy to forget if not openly renounce its original objectives and drift rightwards towards a would-be comfortable accommodation with capitalism – given all this, is it any wonder that social democrats are no longer clear in their own minds what socialism actually is or means, and are apt, or prefer, to think about it in the terms of established liberalism? It was surely entirely typical of these developments that when Neil Kinnock was asked why there was no mention of socialism in Labour's 1992 election manifesto, he replied by saying that everything in it was based on our fundamental socialist belief in the liberty of the individual (or words to that effect).

That belief or value is, of course, the central value of liberalism, not socialism; and it would have been perfectly possible for both Ashdown and Major to invoke it as central to their conception of liberalism or conservatism. In other words, it tells us nothing about what is distinctive about socialism, as opposed to what it may have in common with other ideologies. It is true that the 'New Liberalism', from T. H. Green onwards, did revise and enlarge the concept of freedom, and indeed the philosophy and agenda of liberalism, in ways which pushed liberalism towards socialism; so that there is, as Roy Hattersley showed in *Choose Freedom*, a way of thinking about freedom which does then distinguish socialism from traditional, conventional liberalism, which still views state or public action with some suspicion, still tends to think of freedom as 'the silence of the laws' or as 'an area of non-interference'.

But even allowing for all this, a socialism which elevates freedom or

liberty to the position of its supreme or central value is conceding too much to liberalism. For, however sophisticated the conception of freedom that is employed, what it implies is that the central political aim is to increase the autonomy of the individual, and that no other goal is as important as, let alone more important than, this. This raises a whole range of questions – about both the desirability and feasibility of ever-growing individual autonomy and, at another level, about the very concept of the individual which, as Iain Hampsher-Monk points out in his essay, is called in question by a variety of ways of thinking about people and society, some at least of which would seem to be much closer to socialist thinking than the liberal individualism which underpins the preoccupation with personal freedom or autonomy.

One of the most obviously debatable assumptions inherent in John Stuart Mill's attempt to combine liberalism with utilitarianism is the assumption that freedom and happiness, or if not happiness then some kind of profound personal sense of fulfilment, go together, both for the individual and for society as a whole. Freedom is the precondition of progress; but the autonomous person also derives deep satisfaction from the fact that she or he is autonomous, in control of his or her own life. Now these are both empirical propositions in principle – which is not to say that we could ever finally prove them to be clearly true or false, of course. I think we can safely admit that both propositions have a lot of truth in them. But neither is as self-evidently true as Mill seems to have thought. All the relationships we enter into, and especially family relationships, carry with them obligations, commitments, ties, which entail very considerable losses in freedom and autonomy in all kinds of very obvious ways. Why then do we involve ourselves in them if not because we know that such relationships, although they often bring pain and misery, are also the source of the deepest and most durable happiness and personal security? Autonomy, self-direction, freedom make a strong appeal to those, especially perhaps young people and many women, who feel themselves to be trapped or cramped within established institutions, communities or networks which do not allow them the scope to 'be themselves'. But consider, on the other hand, the plight of both the very young and the very old in the more anonymous urban environments. Consider the old-age pensioner living alone in rented accommodation which has a generally transient population. He or she would probably appreciate a good deal *less* autonomy and freedom because in this situation they are effectively synonyms for emptiness, social isolation and neglect.

Of course one can construct counter-examples – of the gay man or lesbian who escapes from the censorious intolerance of family and village or small town to the relative freedom of the same big city which is so harshly indifferent to the lonely pensioner. I am not, of course, denying the value of freedom and autonomy. I am saying that they are not in themselves an adequate prescription for personal happiness or even self-realisation, and socialists cannot afford to believe that they are. Socialism cannot afford to lose sight of those other dimensions of the good society to which it was classically committed, and which its founders and creators well understood.

Nor can socialism be built upon the foundations of individualism, whether ontological or ethical. The concept of the individual is neither neutral nor banal. The idea that it is a kind of obvious truth was well expressed by that classic liberal writer, E. M. Forster:

... as for individualism – there seems no way of getting off this, even if one wanted to. The dictator-hero can grind down his citizens till they are all alike but he cannot melt them into a single man ... they are obliged to be born separately, and to die separately ... The memory of birth and the expectation of death always lurk within the human being, making him separate from his fellows ...

But about three hundred years earlier John Donne put quite a different construction upon death. Because it is the one destination to which we all travel, it reminds us of our common fate, not our separateness:

that privat and *retirid* man, that thought himselfe his owne for ever, and never came forth, must in his dust of the grave bee published and ... bee mingled with the dust of every high way ...<sup>2</sup>

I think I am right in saying that the ancient Greeks had no word corresponding to 'individual', and that the privacy which is of such importance to modern liberalism did not seem to them to be an important or privileged condition. It was in fact one of deprivation, as Hannah Arendt pointed out, indicated by the word itself. The word 'idiot' signified a purely private person, and it was the public sphere which was the area of freedom.<sup>3</sup> And we need only turn to the opening pages of Aristotle's *Politics* to see that what we think of as essentially a rather too fanciful, if not actually sinister, metaphor – that of the body politic and its members – is for him a perfect image of the relation between the single human person (or man) and the community of *polis* to which he belongs. You could not be a human being outside

society. You would have to be either sub- or super-human, either a beast or a god.

Bentham disliked this metaphor intensely – rightly from his own point of view. ‘The community is a fictitious *body*, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its *members*.’ Note the ‘fictitious’ and ‘as it were’. This is not an image that Bentham wishes to endorse in any way. ‘The interest of the community then is, what? – the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it ... Individual interests are the only real interests.’ When Mrs Thatcher announced that ‘There is no such thing as society. There are only individuals and their families’, she was, apart from the revealingly inconsistent reference to ‘the family’, closer to Benthamite or liberal atomism (of the methodological individualist kind preached by Hayek, Popper, Berlin and others) than she was to traditional conservatism, as represented by Burke: ‘Individuals pass like shadows, but the commonwealth is fixed and stable.’

Liberal individualism thus does not represent a universal perception of the relations between persons and society, as so many of its advocates fondly imagine or assume. On the contrary, it is, if anything, the historical exception to the general rule which sees men and women as essentially social beings, caught up in the web of relationships and institutions which compose a society, and unavoidably dependent upon social interaction for their very existence as human beings. Socialism and communism, as the very terms suggest, belong to that family of ideologies. And they were in origin an attempt to create a modern, post-industrial vision of community which would not only replace nostalgia for the hierarchial pre-industrial society praised and upheld by Burke and the conservatives, but also provide an alternative to the miserably atomised and conflict-ridden conglomerations which capitalism was producing in place of the old feudal order.

I do not myself see how socialism can convert its basic view of the world into one which embodies or reflects essentially the liberal individualist perspective without ceasing to be socialism. This may not worry practical politicians, but it ought to worry socialist philosophers. And, in fact, it ought to worry the politicians as well, because the gap between philosophical fundamentals and the attraction of public support is not the gulf which they, in their more anti-intellectual moods, may suppose it to be.

There is, I think, plenty of evidence, perhaps including the result of the British 1992 election, to suggest that the public do respond to

parties which clearly stand for something basic and big. They want a clear image of a party, and that means knowing what values or principles a party stands for. For example, take Crosland's view that the core of socialism is 'equality': socialism is about equality. That may not be an adequate definition of socialism, and it may not be one with which everyone will agree. But it has two virtues. One is that it is simple and easily grasped and remembered. The other is that it is distinctive. No liberal or conservative leader is likely to copy it. Indeed conservatives are more likely to proclaim their perennial belief in *inequality*. The point of this digression is a simple one: a party needs a clear and distinctive set of values in order to command popular support and allegiance. Philosophy and political effectiveness are not so far apart as might be supposed.

So individualism, and a consequent stress on personal freedom and free choice, do not offer anything distinctive for the Labour Party or the Left, and the temptation to embrace them, just because they became the stock-in-trade of the Right-dominated 1980s, should have been, and ought still to be, firmly resisted. To fight on this terrain is to fight on the enemy's ground.

I would like to add a word here against the current cult of *choice*, which is obviously seen and presented as the embodiment of increased personal freedom. This is, at first glance, difficult to do. To deny choice seems to be arrogant and authoritarian. And perhaps in one version of the ideal world, one of abundance and unlimited resources – a world which looks less and less possible for ecological reasons if no others – there could be choice right across the spectrum of human needs and desires. But in practical terms the pursuit of choice is in many areas not only delusory, but actively damaging. Parents ought to have a choice of schools to which to send their children, it is suggested. Fine, if this was a choice between different educational patterns and philosophies offered by equally good, well-funded and well-supported schools. But that is not the way it is, or will be. Choice of schools means choice between markedly better and worse schools within the state system, or between the state system and private schools for those who can afford the latter. Choice then enhances the benefits and advantages already available to the rich and privileged, leaving the children of the poor and the working class even more disadvantaged than they were before. And even if that were not so, even if the choice between good and less good schools was open equally to working-class parents and children, it would still be the case that those who lost out



in this process of choice would actually lose because of the wide disparities between schools in the state system. Personally, as a parent, I do not want a choice of schools: I simply want a good local school to which my children can happily go.

The same applies in areas like health care. I do not want or need a choice of doctors, hospitals, consultants. I simply want the local provision to be adequate to deal with such health problems as may arise in my family. The focus on choice and competition, in this area as in others, even without its predictable, inevitable, class dimension, means that some people will lose out, will have to make do with second- or third-class care, attention and facilities; and that runs against the principles of fairness and social justice which are supposed to underpin public services like the National Health Service and state schooling.

In some cases I think we should go further, and recognise (and publicise) the virtues of compulsion. I am thinking in particular of the system of National Insurance. The Major government, following the Thatcherite agenda, is clearly working towards a situation in which each individual is responsible for his or her own insurance in respect of health, benefits and pensions. It would be a matter of free personal choice, and the person who chose not to save or insure against old age would simply have to face the consequences of that choice – destitution or dependence on such charity as might be available. This was the nineteenth century situation, and it is the utopia of the more whole-hearted economic liberals. For all I know, that might have been the situation approved of by Mill, who held as a general principle that it was always better that something is done voluntarily rather than by compulsion or by the state. For my part, I know very well that I am not capable of putting aside money voluntarily towards an old-age pension, for both personal and economic reasons. I suspect that most of us are in the same position. We ought, therefore, to be profoundly grateful that we are *compelled* to make this provision. It seems to be a clear, classic case of a situation in which enlightened self-interest is, or is likely to be, in conflict with our immediate desires and interests, and where the state and the law act on our behalf, in our own long-term interest.

A good deal of law and regulation – traffic regulations, for example – can surely be justified in the same way. All of us benefit, overall, from speed limits, parking regulations, traffic lights, etc., even if there are particular occasions when they are a hindrance to our purposes, which may even be good ones (we are rushing someone to hospital).

And the element of compulsion is welcome, because we could not trust ourselves always to comply with a general rule which was voluntary, even if we recognised its rightness and wisdom. If this is correct, then I think it follows that a good deal of nonsense is talked about the supposed virtues of voluntarism. Choice and competition do not necessarily and in all circumstances benefit the user, or society as a whole. I suspect that there is little or no evidence that the imposition of choice in relation to local bus services since 1986 has resulted in improved services, let alone lower fares. And as for railways, one only has to compare the relative rationality of the oligopoly/monopoly situation that emerged in twentieth-century Britain with the costly and destructive absurdities of nineteenth-century competition, when two or three different companies would all construct their separate routes and run their separate trains between, let us say, Nottingham and Sheffield, or even London and Manchester. Similarly, if we had genuine competition between the various private telephone companies, they would presumably all be digging up the roads to lay their separate cables to their customers. Thank God for regulation and quasi-monopoly.

So strongly has the current run against 'statism' and planning in recent years, even on the Left, that it has become difficult to say a word in defence of the conscious rationality of planning as opposed to the supposedly self-regulating freedom and democracy of market choice. It is time, and past time, to buck this absurd trend, and to reassert the principle that there are many situations in which publicly owned and controlled monopoly – with whatever safeguards and mechanisms are necessary to provide for accountability and openness – is the best way of ensuring fair and efficient provision for the public.

The pernicious effects of individualism can also be perceived in the definitions of well-being, or well-offness, which Labour as much as the parties to its Right has employed in recent years. The claim, during the 1992 election, that eight out of ten families would be better off as a result of Labour's tax plans simply accepted the conservative (and Conservative) definition of being better off in terms of having more money in your pocket or pay packet. But it is and always has been of the essence of social democracy – let alone anything more radical – to put forward a definition of well-being which is *not* so crudely and narrowly defined, which recognises that you can be better off in real terms, in terms of having a better standard of living, even if, as a result of taxation, you have less money in your pocket. Money in