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Conventional anticapitalist strategies

Since its very beginning, there has been opposition to capitalism, due to its disruption of communities, exploitation and creation of poverty. In spite of courageous resistance, capitalism in a matter of a few centuries has become the dominant economic system, penetrating into every part of the world and into ever more aspects of people's lives. In order to develop a better nonviolence strategy, it is useful to examine other strategies.

One approach is to try to persuade those with power and wealth, such as landowners and corporate presidents, to voluntarily relinquish their privileges. This approach has repeatedly failed. A few individuals respond to religious and moral calls for using wealth to serve the poor, but not enough. The movement for *bhoodan*—the donation of land for use by the landless—led by Vinoba Bhave in India beginning in 1951, showed the human capacity for generosity. But ultimately, despite massive efforts to encourage *bhoodan*, not nearly enough land was donated to fundamentally transform the system of ownership.¹

The basic problem with the approach of seeking change by persuading the powerful is that power tends to corrupt.² Some individuals can resist the temptations of power, but there are many who can't and plenty more who seek power precisely because they can use it for their own ends, whatever the cost to others. Many of those with power use every available means to protect it. Rather than relying on persuading individuals, the alternative is collective action by large numbers of people.

Until now, the socialist tradition has provided the major source of sustained collective challenge to capitalism. Here, two socialist approaches are considered, Leninism and socialist electoral strategy. Obviously, these are enormous topics, and only the briefest treatment is possible. The focus here is on how these strategies rely on violence.

Leninist strategy

Marx provided a penetrating analysis of capitalism. However, he devoted far less attention to alternatives to capitalism and strategies for achieving them, and consequently there are various interpretations and extensions of Marxism to anticapitalist strategy. One of them is Leninism.³ The basic idea is that a vanguard communist party will capture state power in the name of the working class, an outcome called the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The power of the state is then used to destroy capitalist social relations. Subsequently, the state is supposed to “wither away,” leading to a classless, cooperative society.⁴

Leninist strategy relies centrally and heavily on violence, in at least two ways. First, capture of state power by the vanguard party is expected to involve armed struggle against the police and military of the existing state. Second, once control of the state is achieved, the power of the state—backed by the police and military—is used to smash capitalism. Thus, Leninism is completely contrary to a nonviolence strategy. Leninists seldom discuss what is supposed to happen to the police and military after the state withers away.

In practice, Leninism has performed true to expectations up to the stage of smashing capitalism. Communist parties came to power in many countries through armed struggle or military conquest, including Russia, China, Vietnam and Eastern European countries. In these countries, traditional capitalism was crushed. However, there has never been any sign in any state socialist country of any withering away of the state.

The costs of attempts at violent revolution are enormous. Millions of people have died in revolutionary wars in China, Angola, El Salvador and dozens of other countries. Many attempts at armed liberation have ended in complete failure,⁵ including all attempts to overthrow governments of industrialised countries. Yet for decades many on the left remained attached to the idea of revolution through armed struggle.

Even when armed struggle succeeds in bringing about state socialism, there are serious problems. In many cases the wars of liberation lead to militarisation of the revolution.⁶ The human costs of state socialism have been enormous. Under Stalin, tens of millions of Soviet citizens died in purges and avoidable famines. In China, perhaps 20 million died of starvation in the aftermath of the 1957

Great Leap Forward, a bold socialist initiative, but this horrific toll was hushed up for decades. Most state socialist countries have been highly militarised, have curtailed freedom of speech, movement and assembly, and imprisoned many dissidents.

While state socialism has brought a range of benefits, including land reform, women's rights and economic improvements, it has been a failure from a nonviolence point of view, for two main reasons. First, state socialist regimes have relied on violence for military defence and internal repression. Second, the routine exercise of nonviolent action, such as speeches and strikes, has been ruled illegal and met with full force of the state.

That state socialism "failed" in economic competition with capitalist societies is not the key issue. If the goal is a society without class domination, economic productivity is not the key criterion. Even if state socialism had produced more goods than capitalism, it would have been a failure from a nonviolence viewpoint.

One of the fundamental problems with the Leninist approach is its reliance on violence. The power of the state is supposed to be used to benefit the working class, but in practice it is used to benefit the communist party elite. Leninists argue that violence is simply a tool, a means to an end, but history shows that the tool is not neutral, since it tends to corrupt those who control it.

One possible antidote to corruptions due to the power of violence is to arm the people. If the working class is fully armed, this is a potent challenge to both capitalism and to communist party usurpers. Guerrilla struggles are the prime example of the strategy of arming the people. Some guerrilla struggles have had a high level of participation, with many women involved (though not so many participants who are physically unfit, elderly or have disabilities). However, after the triumph of guerrilla armies, it has been standard for conventional military structures to be set up. The only socialist country to rely heavily on an armed population for national defence was Yugoslavia, which may well have contributed to the scale of violence in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Another problem with state socialism is that although capitalist ownership is eliminated, domination of workers continues in the workplace in much the same way as in capitalism. Some critics even argue that state socialism is really a form of capitalism run centrally by the communist party, which should be called "state capitalism."⁷

Many members of vanguard parties are quite antagonistic towards nonviolence. One possible explanation of this is the heavy reliance of Leninist strategy on violence, seen as necessary because the ends justify the means; if arming the people is seen as necessary, then nonviolence is seen as antirevolutionary. Or perhaps this antagonism is due more to the lack of a vanguard in nonviolence strategy. If there is no vanguard, there is no privileged place for those in it. Another explanation is that creation of dialogue is at the foundation of nonviolent action, something not attractive to vanguard parties since they believe they are exclusive bearers of the true way to revolution. Finally, vanguard parties are built on the premises that capitalism is the central form of oppression and that action in the name of the working class is central to its overthrow. Few nonviolent activists subscribe to these premises.

Socialist electoral strategy

Rather than using armed struggle to capture state power, another option for socialists is to gain state power legally, through election of a communist or socialist party. This, arguably, is just as compatible with Marxism as is Leninism. The first thing is creation of a suitable party, but rather than being or remaining a vanguard party, it must become a mass party in order to win elections. This requires developing popular policies, forging a strong but flexible party organisation, engaging in political debate at local as well as regional and national levels, and campaigning in elections at all levels.

The success of socialist electoral strategy obviously requires victory in elections, but being able to form a national government is only the first step. It is then necessary to use the power of the state to move towards socialism, which means such things as nationalising key industries, introducing or expanding government services such as education and health, putting constraints on corporations and the market, and supporting popular movements for greater power to workers and local communities.

This strategy does not rely on violence for getting elected, but once in government, party leaders seek to use the power of the state to help restrain and gradually replace capitalism. As this process proceeds, the power of the state increases and is more effectively controlled by the government. In the crucial part of the strategy, the actual transition to socialism, the power of the state—including

police and military—is maintained or increased, and used to implement the policies of the socialist government. To support this process, mass mobilisation, possibly including armed workers' groups, may be used.

Socialist electoral strategy has failed in a variety of ways. Many socialist and communist parties have been unable to get enough votes to form a government. When the parties have been very popular, with a chance of winning national elections, sometimes there have been interventions by antisocialist forces to sabotage their efforts, as when the CIA supported nonsocialist parties in Italy and Chile. In some cases after being elected, socialist governments have been “destabilised.” The most famous case is Chile, where the elected socialist government led by Salvador Allende was overthrown in 1973 by a military coup, a process helped along by the CIA.

Whatever the difficulties of gaining and maintaining power, there is a far greater risk of failure from cooption, namely loss of a drive for socialism as the party accommodates itself to the capitalist system. Capitalist interests oppose socialist parties at every stage, from formation to election to policy implementation. Party leaders may be tempted to tone down their rhetoric or to delay introducing socialist initiatives if this means reducing some of the opposition from capitalists, who are able to apply pressure to media, fund opposition parties and withdraw investment.

A communist or socialist party must appeal for votes but operate in a society in which capitalists hold much of the power. Pushing too hard against capitalists may cause a backlash, with capitalists throwing their weight strongly behind less radical parties. However, not pushing hard means disillusionment among some of the most enthusiastic supporters. But left-wing supporters are not likely to vote for conservative parties, so the easiest way to remain electorally viable is to gradually move towards the centre of the political spectrum. Along the way, the rhetoric and actual programme of bringing about socialism is watered down or lost altogether. In this way what started as a socialist strategy becomes a social reform strategy.

This has certainly been the experience of the socialist parties in France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, the so-called Eurosocialists. These parties started out with commitment to democratisation, Keynesian economic restructuring, cultural renewal and independent foreign policy. However, in adapting to the require-

ments of getting elected and exercising power, they jettisoned their radical goals, while the social movements that supported them were disempowered. In all major areas—the economy, the structure of state power, and foreign policy—Eurosocialist governments have retreated from their initial goals and become much more like traditional ruling parties.⁸

Less ambitious than the quest for socialism is the use of state power to bring about social reforms that, among other things, ameliorate the worst effects of capitalism. Examples are minimum wages, unemployment insurance, occupational health and safety regulations, antipollution measures, maternity leave, advertising standards, unfair dismissal legislation and taxation on wealth. While many measures are designed to protect workers, consumers and the environment from the consequences of capitalism, others are intended (as well) to make the capitalist economy work better, such as job training, tariff policy and laws restricting monopolies. The strategy of state-led social reform is often called social democracy, but a better name might be “capitalism with a human face.” It has been the rubric for many reforms that are today seen as essential in a humane, enlightened society.

Social democracy relies routinely on the power of the state to implement and enforce reforms. In this it is not greatly different from the socialist electoral strategy, except that the intended reforms are usually far less sweeping.

The basic problem with social democracy is that it just manages capitalism, not changing its central dynamic. In recent decades, with the rise of a more aggressive procapitalist movement commonly called neoliberalism, many social democratic reforms have come under attack and been whittled away. For example, reforms in western industrialised countries such as the minimum wage, unemployment insurance and a progressive income tax, designed to bring about greater economic equality in society, have been undermined by casualisation of employment, corporate relocations to low-income countries and skyrocketing income for the wealthy.

Another shortcoming of socialist electoralism lies in the electoral approach itself. It seems to be an inherent dynamic of political parties that party elites develop a vested interest in their own power, often at the expense of the public interest. Party organisations over time tend to become more hierarchical and less participatory, a

process that applies to labour parties, communist parties and green parties as well as others.⁹

Another side to elections is the legitimacy that they confer on states. When citizens can vote, they are encouraged to believe that state power can be used in their interests. This may have had some basis in reality when populations and states were much smaller, but today with enormous and complex states, popular control through elections is largely an illusion. Yet this illusion is deeply embedded and fostered by education systems and media attention to electoral politics.¹⁰ Most people see government as the avenue for fixing social problems—even those problems created by government. Socialists see government as the ultimate means for dealing with capitalism, rather than as an essential prop for its survival.

Conclusion

Obviously there is considerable overlap between the strategies of Leninism, socialist electoralism and social democracy. For example, many vanguard parties contest elections and many socialist parties gradually become social democratic parties. Meanwhile, social democratic parties, such as the New Labour Party in Britain, become virtually indistinguishable from their conservative opponents.

From a nonviolence perspective, these strategies have several common problems.

- They all rely on violence, especially the power of the state to implement socialist policies and social reform.
- They all rely on party elites to lead the challenge to capitalism.
- They are all built on productivist, managerial assumptions. The party, the state and the economy are all run on the same lines, with elites at the top to make key decisions, while others are supposed to reap the benefits and support the elites.
- They all provide a key role for intellectuals. Although many intellectuals tie their careers to capitalism, others support the state in its management of society, since this puts intellectuals in a privileged position.¹¹ Close scrutiny needs to be made of any anticapitalist movement led by intellectuals, to ensure the movement is not a way to put a group of them in privileged positions. Radical intellectuals may become involved in revolutionary parties.¹² Successful socialist revolutions almost always are led by intellectuals (Lenin and Mao are

the most prominent examples) and result in power to a stratum of intellectuals.¹³

It is important to acknowledge that these strategies have been the most powerful source of challenge and reform to capitalism. Furthermore, socialist activists have a long record of organising and campaigning at the grassroots, often in a way that builds community solidarity and initiative more than it supports party elites. So socialist strategies, whatever their formal limitations, can provide a framework for day-to-day work that is quite compatible with a nonviolence strategy. The challenge is to link this sort of organising with a different goal: the goal of a nonviolent alternative to capitalism.

Notes

1 Geoffrey Ostergaard and Melville Currell, *The Gentle Anarchists: A Study of the Leaders of the Sarvodaya Movement for Non-Violent Revolution in India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

2 For impressive evidence from psychological experiments, see David Kipnis, *The Powerholders* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 2nd edition); David Kipnis, *Technology and Power* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1990).

3 For an insightful critique of Marxism-Leninism, see Michael Albert, *What Is to Be Undone: A Modern Revolutionary Discussion of Classical Left Ideologies* (Cambridge, MA: Porter Sargent, 1974).

4 This classless society is called communism, but this meaning of the word “communism” has been fatally corrupted by its association with “actually existing socialism,” namely the actual societies ruled by communist parties.

5 Examples include Bolivia, Burma, East Timor, Greece, Hungary, Malaya, Palestine and South Africa.

6 Prominent examples are China, Soviet Union and Vietnam.

7 See, for example, Tony Cliff, *State Capitalism in Russia* (London: Pluto Press, 1955). The category “state capitalism” is contentious given the significant differences with monopoly capitalism.

8 Carl Boggs, *Social Movements and Political Power: Emerging Forms of Radicalism in the West* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

9 Robert Michels, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracies* (New York: Dover, [1915] 1959).

10 Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Consequences of Consent: Elections, Citizen Control and Popular Acquiescence* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982). See also Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Captive Public: How Mass Opinion Promotes State Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

11 Charles Derber, William A. Schwartz and Yale Magrass, *Power in the Highest Degree: Professionals and the Rise of a New Mandarin Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Alvin W. Gouldner, *The Future of Intellectuals and the Rise of the New Class* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

12 For withering critiques, see Max Nomad, *Rebels and Renegades* (New York: Macmillan, 1932); Max Nomad, *Aspects of Revolt* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1959).

13 George Konrád and Ivan Szelényi, *The Intellectuals on the Road to Class Power* (Brighton: Harvester, 1979).