Twenty-First Century Socialism: What It Will Become And Why

Dr. Harriet Fraad & dr. Richard D. Wolff – Photo: harrietfraad.com

The real left is not the caricature crafted by the U.S. right. Alongside parallel right-wing political formations abroad, that caricature tries hard to revive and recycle Cold War demonizations no matter how far-fetched.

Nor is the real left what Democratic Party leaders and their foreign counterparts try hard to dismiss as tiny and politically irrelevant (except when electoral campaigns flirt with "progressive" proposals to get votes).

The real left in the United States and beyond are the millions who at least vaguely understand that the whole system (including its mainstream right and left) is the core problem. As those millions steadily raise their awareness to an explicit consciousness, they recognize that basic system change is the needed solution.

On the one hand, the real left divides into particular social movements (focused on areas like ecological survival, feminism, anti-racism, labor militancy, and sexual rights). On the other hand, those social movements increasingly understand themselves to comprise components of a new unity they must organize. One key unifying force is anti-capitalism. Correspondingly, the different system they seek will likely be some new sort of socialism—with or without that name—particularly suited to 21st-century conditions.

The other big problem for the real left—besides unified organization—lies in its lack of a compelling "vision": a clear, concrete, and attractive image of the social

change it advocates. To succeed, a new socialism for the 21st century needs such a vision. Socialism in the 19th and 20th centuries had a very successful vision as evidenced by its remarkable global spread. However, that vision is no longer adequate. In 19th- and 20th-century socialism's vision, militant unions and socialist political parties partnered to: 1) seize state power from the employer class; and 2) use that power to replace capitalism with socialism and eventually a minimally defined communism. Seizing state power could happen via reforms and electoral victories, direct actions and revolution, or combinations of them. Socialists spent immense energy, time, and passion debating and experimenting with those alternatives. Seizing state power from the employer class was to be followed by using that power to regulate and control private employers or to substitute the state itself (as representative of the collective working class) for private employers. Either way, the transition to socialism meant that the workers' state intervened in economic decisions and activities to prioritize social welfare over private profit. Beyond replacing capitalism with socialism, possibly subsequent moves toward communism were mostly left vague. Communism seemed to be in and about the (perhaps distant) future while politics seemed to call for socialists to offer immediate programs.

So socialists everywhere over the last two centuries concentrated on seizing the state and thereby regulating markets, raising mass consumption standards, protecting workers in enterprises, and so on. Workers increasingly supported a socialist vision that foregrounded how socialist parties would use state power directly and immediately to help them. This vision fit well with socialist parties' partners in labor union movements. The latter contested employers in enterprises, while socialist parties contested the employer class's hold on state power. Thus socialist political parties and labor unions formed, grew, and allied nearly everywhere in the 19th and into the 20th centuries. Together they built effective, lasting organizations. After one of them prevailed in the 1917 Russian Revolution, most socialist organizations and parties split to form coexisting entities (ideologically similar yet often competing): one called socialist and the other "communist."

After 1917, the socialist parties (and most independent socialists too) articulated programs for "progressive" social reforms. The reforms aimed to control capitalism's market structures—its labor, tax, housing, health care, and transport systems—and its cultural superstructure (areas like politics, education, and

religion). Communist parties usually supported socialist reforms, but they went further than the socialists to favor state takeovers of capitalist enterprises. Communists viewed state-owned-and-operated enterprises as necessary not only to achieve but also to secure the reforms socialists advocated.

The socialists' and communists' shared programmatic focus on the state complemented their critiques of capitalism in its predominantly private form across the 19th and 20th centuries. As socialism and communism grew across those centuries, they became *the* great theoretical and practical oppositional forces to capitalism. The more moderate among them defined socialism as a state elected to control and regulate private employers and thereby lessen private capitalism's hard edges, inequalities, and injustices. Scandinavians and other Europeans experimented with such moderate versions of socialism. In Soviet socialism, the state's economic intervention went further. Its communist party leadership replaced private employers with state officials fulfilling a state-generated economic plan. In yet another version of socialism—China's hybrid one—a mix of Scandinavian and Soviet socialisms includes large segments of private capitalists and state-owned-and-operated enterprises. Both are subordinated to a powerful communist party and state.

The common quality of all three socialism was the focus on the state. What most of the socialists involved in the three forms (Scandinavian, Soviet, and Chinese) missed was a shared omission. On the basis of admitting and overcoming that omission, a new socialism for the 21st century emerges complete with a compelling vision.

The state focus of 19th- and 20th-century socialists, besides being a source of their greatest expansionary success, proved also to be a source of their greatest weaknesses and failures. Socialists' and communists' focus on the state combined with neglect of the internal structures of enterprises and households. But what if changing the *macro-level* relation of the state to the private economy from capitalist to socialist required also changing the *micro-level* of workplaces: both the workplace inside enterprises and the workplace inside households? What if socialism, to be achieved, needed interdependent changes at macro- *and* micro-levels of society? What if socialist changes in one level cannot survive without correspondingly socialist changes in the other?

Human relations inside factories, farms, offices, stores, and households were

rarely transformed by what 19th- and 20th-century socialists achieved because they rarely were objects of their social criticisms and debates. Enterprises were internally divided after socialists took power much as they had been divided before. Employers continued to confront employees as buyers of labor power, directors of the labor process, and exclusive owners of the products. States continued to control dimensions of that confrontation—more in moderate socialism than in capitalism—but the basic confrontation persisted. In versions of socialism where state officials replaced private citizens as owners and operators of factories, farms, offices, and stores, the persisting employer-employee organization of human relations inside enterprises invited criticisms. Some socialists thus referred to such systems as types of state capitalism, not of socialism.

By theoretically *not* criticizing capitalism's signature employer-versus-employee internal organization of enterprises, socialists, and communists took a big risk they likely did not understand. When the socialisms they constructed left the employer-versus-employee relationship of enterprises unchanged, that relationship reacted back to undermine those socialisms. Where moderate socialists used state power merely to control capitalists—leaving them their private profits—those capitalists could use the profits to battle socialists and socialism. As socialism's history in Scandinavia and Western Europe exemplifies, capitalists have always done exactly that. They sought and continue now to seek increased private profits by reducing or removing whatever state controls constrain them. In that way, Scandinavian and European type socialisms undermined themselves.

Where socialist state officials function as employers, the oppositional impulses arising among employees (strengthened by earlier socialist movements) will focus on the state. Worse still, employees struggling against employers in societies self-described as socialist may well come to identify their problem and adversary as socialism. In that way, such variants of socialism too undermine themselves.

The socialist and communist traditions largely neglected the internal structures of households as well as enterprises. Thus socialist experiments in constructing new societies mostly omitted the transformation of those structures. Employer-employee relationships inside enterprises inherited from capitalism largely remained: so too did the inherited spousal and parent-children relationships inside households. We say "largely" because there always were exceptions such

as communal households, collective consumption, and larger communes. Yet they remained marginal to the main developments and rarely proved durable. For example, early in Soviet Russia (1917-1930), Alexandra Kollontai initiated major programs of state responsibility and direct support for children and housework. However, European-style nuclear family households, constructed in and for capitalism during the transition from feudalism (see Jacques Donzelot's *The Policing of Families*), remained the basic household organization under socialist societies as well.

In the capitalist system's prevailing household structure, men functioned as household "heads" responsible for disciplining and providing for subordinate wives and children. Wives were to offset the burdens of men's labor in capitalist enterprises, prepare them for that work, and "raise" children to reproduce identical households. Such households should not only support families but also support the state with taxes (thereby reducing the employer class's taxes) as well as soldiers. Efforts by households to obtain and secure state supports (schools, day care, subsidies, even veterans benefits) were systematically opposed or limited by the employer class. Even when won by mass mobilizations assisted by socialists such supports were never secure.

To this day, the employer class that dominates in capitalism blocks raising the minimum wage, mandating paid maternal and paternal leave policies, and funding an adequate public education system or adequate health insurance system. That employer class keeps the traditional household in place or else financially constrains individuals fleeing traditional households to serve the employer class's needs. The authoritarian structure of enterprises (complete with CEOs as dictators inside corporations) reinforces parallel structures in households. Socialists must recognize and act on the premise that the reverse holds as well.

The solution for socialism in the 21st century is to correct for the omission earlier socialisms made. Socialism now needs to add a critical analysis of capitalism's micro-level organization inside workplaces and households to its macro-level analyses. The focus of 21st-century socialism should balance the overstressed macro-level by a concentration on the micro-level: not as an alternative focus but rather as an additional focus deserving special attention.

The solution for socialism and communism in the 21st century is a new, non-state-focused vision. Socialism becomes the movement to transform 1) the top-down

hierarchical organization inside capitalist enterprises (employers versus employees) into a democratic organization of worker cooperatives, and 2) the top-down hierarchical organization inside households into democratized alternatives.

Inside enterprises, each worker will have one vote to decide the major issues facing enterprises. Such issues include what, how, and where to produce as well as how to use the resulting products or, if products are marketed, what to do with the revenues. The difference between employers and employees disappears; the workers become collectively their own boss. Profits cease being the enterprise's top priority or "bottom line" because that maximization rule prioritizes employers' gains over employees' gains and capital's interests over those of labor. In democratized enterprises, profits instead become one among many democratically determined enterprise goals. Each worker has an equal opportunity to fill in the outlines of such a version of socialism with the creative imaginings of what such a transformed enterprise may make possible.

Inside households, socialism must stand for the freedom to construct different kinds of human relations. Kinship becomes only one of many options. Among adults, democratic household decision-making becomes the rule. Broad rights and freedoms are given to children. Responsibility for raising children becomes shared among parents, democratized households, democratized residential and enterprise communities, and a democratized government. The specifics of such shared responsibility will be among the objects of democratic decision-making by all. Whatever may remain of centralized and decentralized state apparatuses will support the new socialism's households generously as capitalism never did. The twin reproductions—of democratic households and democratic enterprises—will be equal social responsibilities: 21st-century socialism's notion of work-life balance.

Such reorganizations of enterprises and households define socialism for the 21st century in a new way. Social change becomes a lived daily experience in each enterprise and household (more profound than mere changes from private to state-regulated, controlled, or owned enterprises). Such a redefined socialism can defeat the anti-socialist movements that have long contested state power versus individual power and that dogmatically endorsed the nuclear family against all alternative household structures. It revives elements of socialism's complicated history of alliance with anarchism.

Democratic worker cooperatives become a key institutional foundation of whatever state apparatus survives. Worker co-ops, democratized households, and individuals will be the state's three revenue sources and thus key sources of its power. They will democratically decide how to divide the provision of such revenue among themselves. Undemocratically organized institutions—such as capitalist enterprises or traditional households—will no longer undermine democratically organized politics. Instead democratic economic, political, and household organizations will collaborate, interact, and share responsibilities for social development and social reproduction.

Democratically transformed enterprises and households are socialist goals well worth fighting for. So too is a state controlled by and thus responsive to individuals within democratically organized households, residential communities, and worker-co-op enterprises. Together these goals comprise an effective, attractive new vision to define and motivate a socialism for the 21st century. One of its banners might proclaim, "No king or dictator in politics; no boss or CEO at work; no patriarch or head at home."

Byline:
Harriet Fraad and Richard D. Wolff

Author Bio:
Dr. Harriet Fraad is a mental health counselor and hypnotherapist in New York City whose writing and multimedia programs cover the interactions between global capitalism and personal life in the U.S. She is the host of the podcast/video series "Capitalism Hits Home," available via Democracy at Work, and co-host of "It's Not Just In Your Head" (with Ikoi Hiroe and Liam Tate). Her radio program "Interpersonal Update" airs on New York City's radio station WBAI Tuesday nights at 6:30 EST. Her latest written work appears in *Knowledge, Class and Economics*, Routledge, 2018.

Richard D. Wolff is professor of economics emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and a visiting professor in the Graduate Program in International Affairs of the New School University, in New York. Wolff's weekly show, "Economic Update," is syndicated by more than 100 radio stations and goes to 55 million TV receivers via Free Speech TV. His three recent books with Democracy at Work are *The Sickness Is the System: When Capitalism Fails to Save Us From Pandemics or Itself*, *Understanding Socialism*, and *Understanding*

Marxism, the latter of which is now available in a newly released 2021 hardcover edition with a new introduction by the author.

Source:
Independent Media Institute

Credit Line:
This article was produced by Economy for All, a project of the Independent Media Institute.