

Between Petrograd and Seattle:

The Paradox of Survivalism of Socialist and Neomarxist Ideology

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Abstract

The recent backlash against globalization is but a reminder of the persistence of socialist and neomarxist ideology, despite its intellectual and practical bankruptcy. This essay reexamines this phenomenon, and argues that this is no paradox, but merely a continuation of a long intellectual tradition, reintroduced by historical circumstance, and reinforced by a confluence of reasons that renders it relevant in modern day context. In particular, these reasons include the perception of the seeming unsustainability of capitalist expansion, an erroneous interpretation of world income distribution, and the intellectual synergy between socialist/neomarxist and postmodern theory. It also draws implications that arise from the analysis.

Keywords: Socialism, neomarxism, neoliberalism, political economy

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I.

In early winter 1999, the streets of Seattle resembled a battleground (Yuen, Katsiaficas & Rose 2002), prompting observers to liken it to the *coup d'état* that characterized the Russian Revolution in Red October, 1917. While such a claim is surely hyperbolic, the events of Seattle and similar events in Prague, Genoa, and elsewhere are a stark reminder that the anti-globalization and anti-capitalism sentiment has spread from the confines of a small, fringe movement into an organized, potent force. This is a force that has not only displayed a tremendous amount of sophisticated, international coordination, but also one that has exploded into fragmented – and on occasion, violent – elements. In addition to their fundamental nature as a reactionary backlash by the traditional losers of globalization – such as labor unions and environmental lobbying groups – the protesters have expanded their support base by finding sympathizers among more moderate elements, such as the left-leaning citizenry as well as academia. The latter is best exemplified by the writings of both independent, dissident writers such as Neumann & Bircham (2003), as well as university-based professors such as Bourdieu (1998, 2003), Chomsky (2002) and Hardt & Negri (2000).

Clearly, this anti-capitalist, anti-globalization view of the world is no longer limited to the far left. The assumptions of the neoliberal worldview – with its emphasis on free markets, individualism, privatization, and deregulation – are increasingly being called into question. In the field of economics, Nobel prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz (1995) has made a strong, impassioned argument against the “Washington consensus” and has called for a brand of “market socialism”. In political science, Adam Przeworski (1990) rejects the bland, rationalist implications of social choice and public choice theories. He debases their central assumptions by the criticism that they fail to “consider that governments may have the institutional capacity and state managers may have the will to act independently of outside influences” (Przeworski 1990, p. 29). As such, he indirectly places faith in a more omnipotent government. In sociology, Esping-Andersen (1991) expounds the importance of a strong welfare state, and makes a strong case for state intervention and involvement in the economy.

This strong revival in the basic spirit, if not the fundamental postulates, of socialist and neomarxist thought necessarily begs the question, so well captured by Stiglitz in the title of his book: “Whither Socialism?”¹ In other words, why does socialist and neomarxist ideology still find currency today,

¹ There is, strictly speaking, a distinction between socialist and neomarxist thinking, as well as its earlier Marxist form. This essay will use these terms relatively interchangeably, as a general reference to the strong-left school of thought. This essay also does not draw a strong distinction between these and communist thought.

despite the failure of socialist experiments all over the world? Or, to view the problem in a slightly different perspective, why is there disillusionment about capitalism, or more generally, the ideals of the right?

This essay seeks to reexamine the question of why the principles and tenets of socialism, or its more modern incarnation of neomarxism, continue to survive – and possibly even thrive – in an age where the theoretical and empirical predictions of the theory have largely been proven bankrupt. Its central thesis is that, despite theoretical inconsistencies and empirical refutation, the fundamental spirit of the ideas first posited by Marx and Engels continue to find relevance in 21st century intellectual thought due to three premises, which build on one another in a mutually reinforcing fashion: First, the perceived weaknesses of capitalism as the alternative; second, the continued desire to address rising social stratification in an increasingly globalized world, coupled with the seeming unsustainability of the existing arrangement; and third, the intellectual capital offered by the structure of dialectical logic and its cross-fertilization with postmodern thinking.

In order to maintain focus and provide a coherent structure, this present study will limit itself to a study of writings in the context of political economic thought. As such, it is immediately acknowledged that the many other fields of study in which neomarxist ideas manifest themselves will not be addressed. However, this should not be viewed as a shortcoming of the present exposition *per se*, but rather a call for future research that extends the central ideas of this essay.

The rest of the essay is structured as follows. Following this introduction, the next section will examine the historical (20th century) roots of how socialist thought has imposed itself on to political economy. It draws upon the work of Karl Polanyi (1944), and makes two primary arguments: First, that the ideas propounded were not new, but merely a continuation of an intellectual tradition that has roots in Marx; and second, that due to historical circumstance, this monograph was to become the basis for much of the literature that was to evolve later. The third section will present examples of how this socialist-neomarxist complex has permeated the domestic political economy (DPE) and international political economy (IPE) literature. This is then followed by the core argument of the essay, that is, the justifications for the continued persistence of socialist and neomarxist thought. A final section concludes with policy implications.

II.

In his now-classic book, *The Great Transformation*, Polanyi (1944, p. 131) makes a case against the unregulated market economy:

“[A] market economy if left to evolve according to its own laws would create great and permanent evils. Production is interaction of man and nature; if this process is to be

organized through a self-regulating mechanism of barter and exchange, then man and nature must be brought into its orbit; they must be subject to supply and demand, that is, to be dealt with as commodities, as goods produced for sale.”

Further on in the book, he takes this argument a step further (Polanyi 1944, pp. 185-186):

“[E]conomic liberalism was wedded to the liberal state, while landed interests were not... [t]he stupendous industrial achievements of the market economy had been bought at the price of great harm to the substance of society.”

Hence, economic liberalism is derided as the source of “great harm to the substance of society”, and is able to wreck “great and permanent evils”. The market economy is therefore portrayed as a “Satanic mill” – an artificial, brutal system that, contrary to its proponents, did not spontaneously evolve but rather was imposed by the architects of post-World War II reconstruction. The whole of economic history is characterized as a “double movement” – a rising tide of market liberalism, met by an equal counteraction of resistance to this liberalism. In this manner, Polanyi sets the stage for many modern-day critics of political-economic liberalism. His work, therefore, may be viewed as a foundation for many of the later literature. Although *The Great Transformation* was largely ignored in his day, it has since been reissued and reread, and may be viewed as the “little red book” of the modern-day anti-capitalist, anti-globalist movement.

Were the ideas put forward by Polanyi novel or groundbreaking? They were not. The ideas set forth in *The Great Transformation* – such as the violation of the social contract, the need to understand the “embeddedness” of the economy into the wider society, and the discontentment with the “commodification” of labor – were themes that ran through the writings of Karl Marx (1867). The *chef-d’oeuvre* of his work, the “double movement”, is but a recharacterization of the teleological dialectic popularized by Hegel and espoused by Marx, albeit in an aberrant form. There is little doubt that Polanyi was profoundly influenced by Marx (Polanyi-Levitt 1990), and although his theorizing adopted a different methodological approach (one grounded more in historical institutionalism and the economic sociology of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, rather than political philosophy), it carried with it the same basic flavors. Polanyi’s contribution, then, was to render a more contemporary context and a more concrete focus on an issue at hand (the neoliberal capture of globalism). It was to provide the emperor with new clothes, so to speak.

Polanyi had the fortune of being the only major work in his time that cautioned against the perils of neoliberal, market-based globalism. The mid-twentieth century was a time of rapid economic growth and prosperity, an unshakable confidence in Keynesian-style macroeconomic management, and an expansion of trade and commerce in the free world. It was therefore, by default, the sourcebook for theorists and intellectuals seeking to distinguish themselves from the mainstream. Moreover, since it

provided a more nuanced agenda than the radicalism of Marxism, it found greater acceptance in what would otherwise have been a hostile environment for socialists.

Why, then, does it speak to the current generation of thought-leaders? The current climate is inhabited by a disenchanted generation that views the current *status quo* as a betrayal by governments to international financial institutions and hegemonic powers; a capitalist system that has birthed recurrent financial crises that impose significant and real costs on the poor and destitute; and the increasing marginalization of the average man, buttressed by rising income inequality and progressively higher costs of living. The critiques of Polanyi are thus resurrected in the contemporary writings of authors such as Bourdieu (1998, 2003) and Chomsky (2002).

The bottom line is that we need to understand modern socialist and neomarxist scholarship in political economy in light of this historical context. The ideals that inspired Marxism have always found an audience with academia. There is no break in the intellectual history in this regard; modern socialism and neomarxism are not necessarily revivals, but rather a constant, consistent evolution of Marxism. This evolution was conditioned by responses to its critics, and to the circumstances that prevailed at the time of writing. Polanyi, and the work of others like him, is but the downstream of an intellectual tradition that began in the Red Lion public house in 1847.

III.

This section provides a selective review of some prime examples of how socialism and neomarxism have found credence in the political economy literature. In doing so, it demonstrates just how common this philosophy remains in capturing the imagination and shaping the beliefs of political economists.

In the DPE context, socialism and neomarxism reject the rationalist view of benevolent government. Instead, socialist/neomarxist writers extend political economic thought to address four key areas: The origins of state autonomy,² the treatment of this autonomy as a game-theoretic equilibrium, the consequences of this autonomy under different state organizational structures, and a revision of the current state-centric approach that regards the state as an institution that shapes society (primarily through force) (Przeworski 1990).

An example of such thinking is the treatment of the political economy of the labor market by Offe (1985), or the examination of the welfare state by Gordon (1994). The stamp of socialist/neomarxist ideas is clearly evident in these studies. Typically, the claim is that there exists a balance of power

² Two approaches adopted by the literature are the abdication/abstention theory and the weak bourgeoisie theory.

between labor and capital – or more specifically, a balance of political power between these classes. As a result, policy is but a translation of this distributive conflict, although this is often resolved in favor of capital. The development of the labor market and the evolution of the welfare state are thus regarded as consequences of the mobilization of the working class. In particular, the wage and job insecurity inherent to the growth and development of capitalist economies drive demands for public supplement in the form of the welfare state.

The weakness of this view is that it places capitalist rule and power on a pedestal. While one cannot discount the possibility that the capitalist class has an influence on state and society, to treat this as a completely separate paradigm, valid in all situations, is to make the error of treating a special case as a general theory. Moreover, this is not well founded on empirical evidence, which is more supportive of the idea of rent-seeking by all types of special interests, not just those representing capital. After all, many modern societies have labor unions and environmental groups that arguably exert a not insignificant pressure on policy. The exploitative power of capital seems to be a relic of merely historical interest. A better approach would be to subsume the study of class conflict under that of institutional influence as well as special interest politics, without placing a unique weight on capital's share in the balance of power.

In the IPE context, socialist and neomarxist global political economy views capitalism as the dominant social institution, with analyses typically proceeding in three steps: First, by a recognition that institutions are a formalization of power; second, by maintaining that these institutions are representations of the changing material base, and hence subject to class capture; and third, by proposing a possible remedial role of the state in such class-divided societies (Palan 2000, p.11-12).³ IPE is cast as an evolutionary process. Beginning with the pluralistic nation-state system as a prerequisite, the modern world system subsequently utilizes international trade and investment as a perpetuating mechanism. The exploitative international division of labor then reinforces its position by the extraction of economic surplus and transfer of wealth, creating “three tiers of states, those of the core, the semi-periphery and the periphery” (Brewer 1980, cited in Gilpin 1987).

Hardt and Negri's (2000) study of the maturing of economic imperialism into a global empire is probably the best recent example of how socialist and neomarxist ideas continue to shape studies on globalization. Hardt & Negri (2000, p. 3, *italics* in original) declare:

³ Gilpin (1987, p.68) adds to this list the additional normative belief that such a “modern world economy is believed to be characterized by inherent contradictions and functions according to the deterministic laws that govern its historical development, inevitable crises, and eventual demise”.

“The problematic of Empire is determined in the first place by one simple fact: that there is world order. This order is expressed as a juridical formation. Our initial task, then, is to grasp the *constitution* of the order being formed today. We should rule out from the outset, however, two common conceptions of this order that reside on opposing limits of the spectrum: first, the notion that the present order somehow rises up *spontaneously* out of the interactions of radically heterogeneous global forces... and second, the idea that order is dictated by a single power and a single center of rationality *transcendent* to global forces.”

In other words, the present world order is a function of conscious planning, although not by a singular imperialist power, but a single imperialist identity. By doing so, this approach also rejects the understanding of the global order as merely a function of capitalistic forces. However, all that Hardt & Negri have done is simply substitute bourgeois-proletariat dialectic for an imperialist-subject one: While traditional Marxist IPE was primarily (and excessively) concerned with capitalism as the force that overwhelmingly shapes the social, political, and economic fabric of the world, Hardt-Negri style IPE frames the enormous complexity of international relations as an excessively simplistic one of imperial sovereignty: In their words, the “outside” of modernity no longer exists. Instead, the passage has moved from “modern to imperial sovereignty: from people to the multitude, from dialectical opposition to the management of hybridities, from the place of modern sovereignty to the non-place of Empire, from crisis to corruption” (Hardt and Negri 2000, p. 202-203).

This rejection of any role for individuals, groups, and institutions outside of the simple neomaxist taxonomy lays too much claim to a singularity in the world order, a singularity that is easy to be uncomfortable with, and a singularity that seems to defy the plurality and nonlinearity that exists in the real-world international relations. The insistence of a single identity as the illuminati, one that defines the complexity of the world, seems somewhat remote. History has shown us that world powers wax and wane, as do imperialistic orders. It seems more constructive to view this organic system as one composed of heterogeneous agents, some with more influence than others, but all being constrained (to a greater or lesser extent) by the institutional framework that is beholden to no single empire.

IV.

In the preceding discussion, it appears that, while socialist/neomaxist thought suffers from both theoretical flaws as well as empirical irrelevance, it continues to influence the political economy literature. In order to explain this continued existence, therefore, we venture some reasons for this paradox of survival.

First and foremost, there are the perceived weaknesses of capitalism as an alternative, especially given the reality of financial crises, economic depressions, and corporate scandal. Asia in 1997/98, Latin America in 2002, the corporate dominance of the Microsofts and Nikes and Wal-Marts, coupled with the Enron and Worldcom scandals all point to (or so it is claimed) the failure of capitalism. Nor is this purported failure limited to crises in financial markets. The breakdown of world trade talks in Cancun are cited as a further sign that the Bretton Woods system, envisioned in 1944, is on the brink of collapse. To top it off, special interest activity, whether in a mature democracy (Olson 1982) or in an autocratic state (Mitra, Thomakos & Ulubaşoğlu 2002), short-circuits the equality of players in the entire market process. All these factors are leading to “undemocratic globalization” (Hamilton 2003). The neoliberal world order is thus built on sinking sand, since greed, corruption, and self-interest need to be tampered by regulatory mechanisms and prudential structures, in order to avoid recurrent crises (Morris 1999).

In light of the aforementioned rationale, the capitalist system appears wanting; the grass of socialism tempts with its sympathetic, sycophantic alternative. This view is not new, nor is it difficult to subscribe to. Interventionism provides an illusion of control, and hence a sense of security. Even Schumpeter (1954), generally regarded as a free-market liberal, lamented the “crisis of the tax state”, and argued for greater state intervention to tweak the machinery of *laissez-faire*.

But is socialism itself a credible alternative? Notwithstanding the technical difficulties raised in the practical the implementation of the socialist and neomarxist agenda (Hayek 1948; Mises 1990), there is little reason to believe that these ailments will not arise in a socialist utopia. The drawing back of the Iron Curtain has shown that the communist states were not insulated from crises and corruption (Gustafson 1989; Rothschild & Wingfield 2000). Indeed, it seems more likely that *all* systems will be subject to periodic crises, recessionary periods, and unfortunate flights of notoriety. The pertinent question is which system is more *efficient*, in the sense of whether it is more likely to function with a lower probability of breakdown, and yet optimize on scarce resources. In this sense, there are few who would argue that capitalism does not provides a superior organizational structure, given the success of the price mechanism in coordinating the allocation of resources.⁴

⁴ This is not to say that efficient allocation in a planned economy is not possible. The work of general equilibrium theorists such as Koopmans, Arrow, and Debreu (for a recent treatment of these ideas, see Black 1995) has shown the equivalence of the collectivist economy to the decentralized economy, in the idealized Walrasian world. However, the likelihood that the classical Walrasian assumptions may be violated is high; the empirical reality of this was brought home by the failure of the socialist experiment in Russia and elsewhere.

The more specific critiques of the existing system are also weak. The benefits of free, unfettered trade are one of the few issues that economists continue to agree on (Bhagwati 2002). There is also a strong case for free capital markets (DeRosa 2001), although the issue has not been completely resolved. And even in the presence of special interest activity, political competition may still have the potential to yield efficient outcomes (Becker 1983; Wittman 1995). Thus, on these purely positivist grounds, decentralized economic organization should find a more receptive audience than it currently enjoys.

This naturally begs the question of which system is more *equitable*, or more generally, what normative properties the two economic systems entail. Therefore, the continued desire to address rising social stratification is the second strong motivation that leads many to gravitate toward socialist and neomarxist thought. After all, how can we regard ourselves as an enlightened civilization, when 10 percent of the world's population owns 90 percent of its wealth? How can a concerned global citizen remain nonchalant about the vast excesses of the First World, which far outstrip the capacities of the Third? Surely the desire for equity in this increasingly globalized world, often viewed as harsh and impersonal, is a motivation for pursuing the socialist agenda?

The problem with this line of reasoning is that it does not adequately match up to empirical evidence. Several recent studies have shown that there has been an overall diffusion of wealth and the reduction of absolute levels of poverty throughout the world over the 20th century (Dollar & Kray 2001; Quah 2002; Sala-i-Martin 2002).⁵ Even if we were to accept the claim that there is considerable inequality in the world, it is difficult to deny that the absolute per capita welfare in economies that have embraced the free-market, outward-oriented economic development model is higher. Would not the *absolute* improvement of living standards far outweigh its *relative* deterioration? The truth is, there *is* greater equity, once one compares not cross-sectionally, but across time. Many in the Third World of today are far better off than their equivalents the First World a century ago. The assertion that socialism or neomarxism might provide greater equity seems self-serving, and weaker, once seen in this light.

There is, of course, the charge of geophysical and geopolitical *unsustainability*. Environmentalist groups protest the mistreatment of Mother Earth, scientists debate the “discernable human influence on the global climate” (Houghton *et al* 1996; Houghton *et al* 2001), and politicians (and some

⁵ Although these studies have not been without their critics. Milanovic (2002), using household survey data, argues that the world income distribution has in fact worsened between 1988 and 1993. A (fairly balanced) view that accounts for both sides is that of Rodriguez & Rodrik (2000).

industrialists) scramble to acknowledge the externalities generated by unbridled capitalism. In geopolitics, dependency theorists (Caporaso 1980; Cardoso & Faletto 1979) have joined ranks with socialists and neomarxists in decrying the exploitation of the global South, yielding the global class struggle of Modern World Systems theory (Wallerstein 1974; Hall 1996). These share one common strain: They believe that the present capitalism-based system, without radical change, is not sustainable.

While we will not go into the deeper question of whether these claims are justified,⁶ we shall instead venture the simpler question of why socialists and neomarxists regard the tweaking of the present system as unsatisfactory. In our view, this stems from how socialists and neomarxists appear wedded to the idea that capitalism is part of an enlightened conspiracy theory,⁷ which seeks to exploit both the environment and Third-world resources for capital's benefit. This rejection of capitalism finds root in this primary distrust. Is such distrust warranted? There is, after all, little evidence that socialism, as was practiced in the former Soviet bloc countries, proved to be kinder to the environment. Similarly, the data show that there was no relative deterioration in the terms of trade in primary-production economies through the late 19th and 20th century, thus debunking the core-growth-at-expense-of-periphery argument of Modern World Systems. Unless one is entrenched in the neomarxist theoretical construct, it would seem far more productive to seek resolution of failures by fine-tuning the existing system, rather than overthrowing it completely. This leads us, then, to the final point.

Academic empathy to neomarxism seems to derive from the intellectual capital offered by the structure of dialectics – with its logical structure unconstrained by logical determinism – and its interaction with postmodern thought – with its emphasis on individual methodism and heterodox theory. Whereas postmodernism does yield some legitimate claims that may enrich our understanding of social scientific processes – in particular, the postmodern concept of culture (Steinmetz 1999) and Foucauldian notions of power (Foucault 1977; 1991) provide insights not fully captured by standard determinism – to use postmodernism as an entire system of understanding leaves too many gaps that sacrifice the intellectual rigor of the analysis. This ambiguity is also intrinsic in the dialectical form of reasoning: Engels' (1880) (in)famous example is that the conventional view of a creature being either alive or dead is mistaken, since the precise time of death is difficult to determine. Dialectics therefore

⁶ For critiques of each, see Lomborg (2000) and Gilpin (1987, 2001).

⁷ Conspiracy, because neomarxism still accords capital with a separate, more powerful role as a special interest, while enlightened, because neomarxists no longer see the inevitability of Marxism as the final, glorious outcome as necessary.

opens up the possibility that allows for a thing to simultaneously exist and not exist – to be both dead and alive. While this is potentially subject to a very important caveat,⁸ the practical relevance of dialectical reasoning is doubtful.

In fact, the *Social Text* affair,⁹ coupled with the rejection of dialectics by the field of philosophy in general,¹⁰ shows that, whereas some mileage may be obtained from milking ideas within the rubric provided by postmodern thought, it is ultimately a sandcastle when used as a solitary foundation for academic research. The lasting appeal of the socialist-neomaxist-postmodernist analytical framework may provide some residual rhetorical appeal, but it has little place in serious scholarship.

V.

In the final analysis, the paradox of the survival of socialism and neomaxism may not be a paradox after all. The perceived unattractiveness of the neoliberal mode of production and organization, together with the erroneous view that capitalist expansion is both unsustainable and has led to growing inequality, provide many with a rationalization for the rejection of capitalism. These factors, when added to the intellectual appeal of the marriage of socialism and postmodernism, provide a basis for the continued survival of socialist idealism.

Yet, the essay has also alluded to many of the theoretical and empirical weaknesses of this school of thought. Although it is difficult to be optimistic that the strength of the left will diminish in the near future, the increasing disconnect of these ideals will eventually exert a toll on the credibility of its believers. Already, its stronghold is primarily in academia, as much of the rest of the world has moved away from its most extreme assertions.

The implications underlying the above analysis are straightforward. There is a need for continued education and awareness. Socialist and neomaxist ideology will always appeal to those who have not been introduced to the consistent, persuasive logic underlying neoliberalism. Without a strong

⁸ The caveat here is that even physical reality may on occasion be characterized by such implicit uncertainty. The logic of Schrödinger's cat, coupled with Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, provides a potential refutation of determinism. However, recent physical research has begun to provide a definite answer to the fate of Schrödinger's feline (Myatt *et al* 2000).

⁹ This refers to the furor ignited by Alan Sokal, where he criticizes the decline in the standard of intellectual rigor in American academic humanities, as exemplified by his successful publication of a parody article to the prestigious journal *Social Text*. See Sokal (1996a, b).

¹⁰ The philosopher Sydney Hook's response to dialectics was devastatingly simple: "State a proposition that would be false according to conventional logic, but true according to dialectic." (Hook, cited in Muravchik 2002).

understanding of why free markets and individual rights are the best bet for efficient and equitable outcomes, the ideological pull of socialism will never be eroded. And while it is granted that there are problems with neoliberal capitalism, the most realistic way forward lies, in our view, not in a revolutionary paradigm shift, but a careful, measured correction of its shortcomings through constructive debate and prudent policy.

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