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Socialist History and Socialism's Future

Mark A. Gabbert

Stephen Eric Bronner, *Socialism Unbound* (New York: Routledge 1990).

THESE DAYS IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE a less fashionable topic than the future of socialism. Since the collapse of Stalinism in Eastern Europe, socialism has been relegated to the dustbins of history, where historians can set about sorting it into monographs without suffering the guilt that always arises when the current relevance of a topic raises suspicions of 'presentism.' Indeed, the universities are now full of political scientists and economists who expected to spend their lives in fields like Comparative Communist Systems or Socialist Economies, but who now find themselves plagued by the sense of futility that arises for social scientists when they are reduced to doing what seems like history.

Of course there remain a few intransigents, a few commentators who are not convinced that history is over for the socialist project. These people persist in thinking that, far from being the remedy for all that ails us, capitalism is undemocratic, irrational, and exploitative. Such irreconcilables refuse to give up on socialism: they set as their task the critical evaluation of the socialist past; they want to revitalize the rejected tradition; they would like to turn it into something that could put an end to capital's domination of the world. Stephen Eric Bronner fits this mould.

Bronner's *Socialism Unbound* is an effort to throw off what he calls the shackles of teleology, authoritarianism, dogmatism, and opportunism that have led to the current crisis of the socialist movement. Bronner wants to renovate socialism by restoring its dual character as heir to the democracy, egalitarianism, and internationalism of late 18th-century bourgeois radicalism and as a movement committed to the emancipation of labour.

For Bronner, socialism's shackles were forged theoretically and then came to hobble practice. In his review of socialist theory from Marx and Engels to Lenin and Luxemburg, Bronner finds plenty to reject. Marx and Engels themselves come off relatively unscathed. Bronner sees them as consistent democrats, egalitarians,

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and internationalists from start to finish. Indeed, these principles provided them with a "transcendent perspective" from which to evaluate every form of practice and protected them from identifying the socialist cause with any one form of political organization or set of tactics. Of course, their theory did depend on the empirical confirmation of projections that the proletariat would become a numerical majority; and Engels is chided mildly for having, in his later years, innocently joined this teleology to the then fashionable scientific theories and in the process turned Marxism into a system.

This tendency to system building found full blown expression in the theory of Karl Kautsky which dominated the movement after 1890. Taking account of the striking growth of proletarian numbers and of the increasing concentration of capital which seemed to confirm the predictions of the *Communist Manifesto*, and convinced of the crisis-ridden nature of capitalism, Kautsky went whole hog for teleology. Proletarian numbers would increase, leading to an electoral majority for socialist political parties while capitalism lurched on its way to inevitable breakdown, so that socialism would emerge inevitably in the normal course of historical development. As Bronner notes, this theory transformed Marxism "into a closed system predicated on the *primacy* of economics and determinism over politics and freedom" (43); and it failed entirely to develop a political strategy for the transition to socialism. Bronner argues that Kautsky's orthodoxy collapsed as the proletariat failed to become a numerical majority and World War I destroyed the illusions of socialist internationalism. By the 1920s, the Kautskyite position had abandoned the field to Bernstein's revisionism and Lenin's Bolshevism. Bernstein and Lenin are the chief villains of Bronner's piece.

Bernstein's revisionist *Evolutionary Socialism* (1899) rejected the teleological certainties of Kautskyism as so much metaphysical rubbish and abandoned both Marxian economics and class analysis for a populist reform of capitalism. But Bronner argues that, in opting for a narrow empiricism, Bernstein also abandoned any commitment to normative principles which would enable him to evaluate short-term practice. Consequently, social democracy lost touch with egalitarianism and internationalism, lost its capacity to criticize the undemocratic nature of the capitalist accumulation process, and became mired in a politics of compromise for its own sake. Well, not quite for its own sake: particular policies were accepted or rejected primarily on the basis of whether they furthered the interests of the social democratic political organization itself.

Critical of revisionism, Bronner is even more negative about the legacy of Leninism. He admits that Lenin was a principled revolutionary who judged everything political from the perspective of whether or not it furthered the destruction of capitalism. But for Bronner, the great fault of Leninism lay in Lenin's insistence on creating a "party of a new type" which not only claimed to know the true interests of the proletariat but substituted itself for the working class as the agent of revolution. In short, Bronner thinks that from start to finish Lenin held the French socialist Louis-Auguste Blanqui's (1805-1881) view that socialism must

be established by a dictatorship of the revolutionary elite. Leninist elitism led to a Bolshevik refusal to treat socialist opponents with "revolutionary tolerance" (84) and ultimately paved the way for party dictatorship.

Though Lenin himself was not as nasty as Stalin, nevertheless Bronner thinks it undeniable that Lenin's fetishism of the party prevented him from seeing the need for democratic political controls on the post-revolutionary regime. This laid the ground for Stalinism with its penchant for terror and force, its capacity to rationalize any party-approved atrocity as promoting socialism, its resort to blaming mistakes on counterrevolutionary plots, and its identification of the interests of the socialist movement with the short term national needs of the Soviet Union.

Rejecting both Leninist authoritarianism and the unprincipled compromises of social democracy, Bronner identifies himself with what he calls the "underground tradition" of which Rosa Luxemburg was the greatest representative. Bronner sees Luxemburg as a principled democrat, internationalist, and egalitarian. She recognized that Leninism led to the stifling of proletarian creativity while Bernstein's reformism opened the door to a politics of permanent opportunism which would leave capitalist exploitation solidly in place. Bronner thinks Luxemburg's Marxism is dated because of its orthodox teleological assumptions and the passing of the international socialist context in which she worked; but he takes her as the inspiration for his own efforts to address the problems exposed in his historical account of socialist theory.

In his concluding chapter, Bronner sets out to liberate socialism from both the remnants of teleology and its temptation automatically to identify progress toward emancipation with the successes of any party, be it Leninist or social democratic. The cure for this is what he calls ethics of "democratic accountability" against which all socialist practice must be measured. Such ethics would both embody the formal civil and political rights promoted by bourgeois radicalism and go beyond them to the concern for substantive economic and social democracy which is the hallmark of Marxism.

Here Bronner finds continuing relevance in Marx's critique of capitalism. For emancipation requires putting an end to the "inverted world" in which capital drives people's lives and where what is useful is what will sell. Substantive democracy requires precisely an institutional framework within which what is useful can be consciously determined democratically by the community. For Bronner, socialist practice must be judged by whether it creates both formal and substantive conditions under which free and equal individuals can "determine their lives and make their choices responsibly" (155).

Bronner recognizes that the struggle for genuine democracy is a class project. He finds some merit in both empirical definitions of class which emphasize lifestyle and occupation, and in the structural approach that includes in the proletariat all those required to live from the sale of their labour power. But determining the agent for socialist transformation requires introducing a political criterion. Such a criterion must enable us to identify sellers of labour power with an interest in

emancipating themselves from a process of accumulation driven by profit-seeking, and to create the class agent necessary to achieve genuine democracy.

Here Bronner introduces the notion of the "class ideal" — a vision both of proletarian unity and of the "new utopian order" toward which workers must struggle. The class ideal prescribes a commitment to democracy against all forms of arbitrary power, to egalitarianism against the exploitative nature of capitalism, and to internationalism against militarism and imperialism. It provides the socialist movement with a standard against which all political practice must be judged, indicates the essential preconditions for achieving social control over production, and confirms the principles which must underlie any genuinely emancipatory order. It is, obviously, a complex of principles that production workers are more likely to accept than senior management and thus it provides a political means for defining class. But Bronner emphasizes that such an ideal is purely ethical: there are no teleological guarantees that history itself will realize its content or that any party will inevitably practice its principles. It becomes, rather, a normative position from which to evaluate both past and present socialist practice.

Bronner thinks many of the contentious issues of socialist politics emerge in a new light when viewed from the perspective of the class ideal. He concludes, for example, that both reform and revolution must be judged against the extent to which their consequences enhance collective power over the accumulation process and "enable the emancipatory values of the future to appear in the actions undertaken in the present" (179) — a stand which makes him particularly skeptical of revolutionary politics. Further, political decentralization is no automatic corrective to the authoritarian centralism identified with Bolshevism. Bronner thinks that both egalitarianism and democracy require a democratically accountable central authority to enforce rights and responsibilities against violations and free riding at the local level, and to implement policies affecting such broader matters as the environment. As for socialist internationalism, it demands above all the recognition that the general interests of working people cannot be identified automatically with the apparent interests of any one nation state or national working class. Bronner is suspicious of uncritical emphasis on the principle of national self-determination in a world where the mobility of capital is increasingly rendering the nation state obsolete as a basis for emancipatory struggle. He emphasizes that a global redistribution of wealth and the capacity to eliminate war will require the gradual strengthening of existing international institutions and the creation of a bureaucracy committed to internationalist principles, however problematic this may be.

Bronner has written an intelligent and thoughtful book — one in which the analysis is underpinned by a sense of realistic optimism which offers a useful antidote to the gloom and doom that currently plagues the left. There are places where the terms could be more clearly defined, and the argument often needs a tighter structure and more consistent focus. Nevertheless, the attack on teleological thinking is relentless, and anyone working on the basis of Marxist assumptions will gain from Bronner's exposition a better sense of how easily historical materialism

can slip into the teleological mode. Bronner's notion of the class ideal helpfully reformulates the idea of socialist democracy in a way that offers to both historical analysis and socialist politics a perspective from which to evaluate practice. Bronner provides, too, a trenchant critique of the political bankruptcy of postmodernism and a strong confirmation of the continuing relevance of class in a political scene dominated by popular movements.

There is less reason, however, to be satisfied with Bronner's account of the history of socialist theory. The least satisfactory aspect of the book is its treatment of Leninism. In his effort to show that Stalinism is importantly derived from Lenin's allegedly Blanquist theory of the party, Bronner both gets the theory wrong and attributes to ideas a causal importance which they did not have.

Bronner has ignored entirely Neil Harding's indispensable study[1] of Lenin's political thought. A work of meticulous and exhaustive scholarship, Harding's book demolishes the myth of Lenin's Blanquism. Harding demonstrates that Lenin's thought developed through two phases, each of which was solidly based on a thoroughly Marxist analysis of capitalist development. During the first phase (1898-1914), Lenin's political ideas, including his notion of the party, were derived from his massive study of Russian economic development, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1899). An argument against the Populist notion that Russia could avoid capitalism and develop on the basis of the peasant commune, this research convinced Lenin that the industrial proletariat would be the leading social force in a struggle to topple the Tsarist autocracy and replace it with a democratic republic. *Pace* Bronner, the task of the party was not to substitute itself for the proletariat but to mobilize and lead workers in this struggle for democracy. The famous idea that the party had to bring socialist consciousness to the working class from the outside was no Leninist novelty: Lenin himself cited Kautsky in defense of the notion, which was in any case widely held among orthodox Russian Marxists. Indeed, Lenin's treatise on the party, *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), was not a handbook for insurrectionists, but largely a defense of the traditional Russian Marxist emphasis on political struggle against the economism of a younger generation preoccupied with issues arising from the shop floor. Bronner takes no account of any of this.

Harding's work casts important new light on the legendary split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. He shows that, like all orthodox Russian Marxists, the Mensheviks took Lenin's ideas on party organization for granted and he demonstrates that the final Bolshevik-Menshevik split was fundamentally due to disagreements over the role of the proletariat in the democratic revolution and not over party organization at all. In fact, at the Party Congress of 1906, the two factions voted overwhelmingly to accept Lenin's standard for party membership, the same

[1]Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought*. Vol I: *Theory and Practice in the Democratic Revolution* (London 1977). Vol. II: *Theory and Practice in the Socialist Revolution* (London 1981).

standard which had been such a bone of contention at the party congress of 1902. Not only that, responding to the mass militancy triggered by the Revolution of 1905, Lenin abandoned entirely the hierarchical model of party organization he had advocated in 1902: by 1906 he was arguing against the Mensheviks and others that party membership should be thrown open to any worker who wanted to join, that lower level party organizations should enjoy considerable autonomy from the centre, and that party life should be regulated by elections at every level.

Throughout this period, Lenin remained committed to a stage theory of Russian development, according to which, after the democratic revolution against the autocracy, a whole epoch of capitalist development would have to pass before socialism would be on the agenda. In none of this is there so much as a hint of Blanqui's notion of a pedagogical dictatorship over the proletariat.

The second phase of Lenin's political thought began with the outbreak of World War I and was based on his studies of imperialism. Harding shows how, struggling to make sense of the wartime collapse of socialist internationalism and to devise a new political strategy, Lenin concluded that state-supported monopoly undercut the tendency of capitalism to expand the productive forces; that the imperialist state, however democratic its form, was a bureaucratic-military machine designed for warfare and undercutting working class militancy; and that warfare was a permanent feature of the age of imperialist rivalry. Moreover, on the positive side, the centralized banking institutions typical of finance capital had laid the technical basis for socialist economic planning.

In short, capitalism had come to the end of its historically progressive phase and socialism was on the agenda. This socio-economic analysis led Lenin to abandon his stage theory of Russian development and to argue that a proletarian revolution in Russia could initiate socialist transformation in the developed West. It led him as well to the semi-anarchist position on the state embodied in *The State and Revolution* where he argued that the imperialist state had to be smashed rather than utilized as a means of socialist construction.

In this period Lenin barely mentions the party, and from the insurrection of October 1917 until spring 1918 he uses a political language which encourages grass roots spontaneous action, untrammelled by orders from above, to construct alternatives to the Tsarist state. It is a language which rivals Luxemburg's work on the mass strike in the confidence it expresses in proletarian initiative.[2]

Harding makes it clear that not until the onset of civil war, economic collapse, and the failure of revolution in Europe does Lenin turn to the authoritarian, dictatorial rhetoric and policies which are typically associated with his name. This crisis led to the collapse of Lenin's class analysis as he increasingly narrowed his view of the agent of socialist transformation from the people as a whole, to the industrial proletariat, to its most militant sector, then to the party alone and, finally, to a few dedicated and honest bureaucrats.

[2]For an account of Lenin's spontaneism in 1917 see Harding, vol. II, Ch. 8.

Here at last, as a consequence of Soviet isolation and the destruction of the Russian working class in civil war, Lenin took refuge in a Blanquist approach. Initially conceived as the mobilizer of working people for revolutionary struggle, Lenin reconceptualized the role of the party in ways that can only be called substitutionist. Nevertheless, it is quite mistaken to claim that Lenin had held such views from the beginning. Rather, as Harding concludes, this shift represented not Lenin's return to an earlier view of the party but the complete disintegration of the economic and social theory he had held for his entire political life.

Bronner has no sense of the development of Lenin's political thought nor of the way in which it was rooted in a genuinely historical materialist account of capitalist development. He pays no attention, either, to the circumstances under which Lenin's authoritarianism was generated. Instead, he offers an essentially idealist account in which Lenin's theory of the party is wrongly alleged to be the "lynch pin" of his entire system and shown to be the main cause of Stalinism. In Bronner's account, even *The State and Revolution* is wrenched from its historical context and presented as yet another instance of Lenin's determination to substitute the party for popular control. All of this results in an ahistorical analysis that differs little from traditional litanies of the evils of Leninism — litanies which seem to be the last legacy of the Cold War, now that they are in vogue on both sides of the Elbe.

Labour historians familiar with recent studies by Alexander Rabinowitch, David Mandel, Steve Smith, and other historians of 1917[3] will realize that their work has had no impact on Bronner. These scholars have shown that the very success of the Bolsheviks was due to their closeness to, indeed immersion in, the world of rank-and-file workers, to the overwhelmingly proletarian origin of the party's membership, to the party's responsiveness to working-class demands, and to the open and democratic quality of internal party life. Bronner does cite Rabinowitch on the mass nature of Bolshevism in 1917, but only to dismiss him by asserting that this historical example cannot cancel the importance of Lenin's real intentions or the ultimate impact of his elitist theory.

Bronner's discussion of Leninism takes up only a portion of one chapter of his book. Yet the implications of his neat wrapping up of Bolshevism in Lenin's theory of the party resonate throughout the work. Yes, he says, both reform and revolution have to be judged against the class ideal — but this is especially true of revolution, which given its history must be viewed with particular suspicion. Not surprisingly,

[3]See Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power: The Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd* (New York 1976); David Mandel, *Petrograd Workers and the Fall of the Old Regime: From the February Revolution to the July Days, 1917* (London 1983) and *Petrograd Workers and the Soviet Seizure of Power (July 1917-June 1918)* (London 1984); and S.A. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories 1917-1918* (Cambridge 1983). A useful intorduction to the recent social history of the Bolshevik Revolution is Daniel H. Kaiser, ed., *The Workers' Revolution in Russia, 1917: The View From Below* (Cambridge 1987).

he has a particularly sanguine view of the potential for reformist progress in advanced capitalist democracies. Then, he asserts, what is genuinely revolutionary depends on the context. Take Léon Blum, for example. For simply proposing a French version of the New Deal he was tried for treason by the Vichy regime — which seems to prove to Bronner that Blum was a genuine revolutionary.

In fact, for all the strength of his critique of revisionist social democracy, the undertones of Bronner's argument tend to sound social democratic themes. He is uncomfortable with Marx and Engels's view of the Commune of Paris as the prototype of the transitional state and insists throughout that they remained committed to a democratic republic. He gives no adequate account of the role of the German Majority Socialists in repressing the German Revolution and thus powerfully reinforcing the international isolation that contributed so much to Bolshevik authoritarianism. He finds it regrettable that Lenin should have seen class conflict as a kind of warfare and he points to the "invective" and "military tone" of Bolshevism as one of its negative characteristics. He cites with approval Léon Blum's observation that Bolshevik invective made for a certain "incompatibility of feeling and morality" which distinguished Leninism from Social Democracy.

This focus on Bolshevik nastiness and authoritarianism allows Bronner to overlook entirely the catastrophic historical consequences of social democracy as practiced by men like Léon Blum whose "feeling and morality" were apparently so superior to those of the Bolsheviks. After all, there are arguably negative consequences to less combative, suspicious and hostile forms of socialist politics, and Blum's case provides us with good examples.

When, after the electoral victory of 1936 that made him Premier of France, Blum was faced with a massive outpouring of working-class militancy in the form of strikes and factory occupations, he did everything in his power to bring the movement under control. Blum was committed to accomplishing his reform program in a thoroughly constitutional fashion, through regular parliamentary channels. No help was needed, or wanted, from extraparliamentary popular protest. Indeed, he continually assured the French propertied classes that the Popular Front victory did not mean a revolution, but only a moderate reform of the existing system.[4]

But, when having halted the working-class movement through a combination of wage hikes and threats of force, and Blum set about implementing his program, things did not work out as planned. French bankers refused to loan the government money to inaugurate its job creation, and investors took billions of francs out of the country. Blum was flabbergasted; how could these rulers of the French economy be anything less than good patriots? Remarkably enough, they seemed more concerned with the security of their profits and social position than with the

[4]The standard account of Blum's career is Joel Colton, *Léon Blum: Humanist in Politics* (New York 1966).

difficulties of the unemployed or supporting a government, duly elected or not, that had only encouraged workers to make "unreasonable" demands.

Within a year, Blum was forced out of power and the Right came increasingly to dominate French politics. The gains of the Popular Front were lost as trade union membership declined and inflation ate up wage gains. In 1940 France would fall to the Nazis and a considerable number of Blum's fellow socialist MPs would vote to set up the authoritarian Vichy regime.

Now these are mistakes that Lenin, for all his invective and alleged moral coarseness, would never have made. He knew that no progress could be made without a highly militant and mobilized extraparliamentary workers' movement. He understood the limits of the bourgeois commitment to democracy and recognized that, in the crunch, bourgeois proponents of parliamentary rule would sabotage the policies of progressive governments or turn to authoritarianism and violence if their interests required it. In these ways, his vision of class struggle as a form of warfare provided him with an indispensable realism.

No doubt, Léon Blum was a sweeter, more conciliatory man. He was, after all, a gentleman. Born into the haute bourgeoisie, Blum was a patrician whose personal wealth, education, early career as a high civil servant, and general mode of life separated him fundamentally from the workers his party represented. As Helmut Gruber has noted, "[i]n a party of comrades [Blum] remained Monsieur even to the other leaders .... His relationship with his followers was tutelary to the point of being patronizing."[5] Not surprisingly, British Tory Foreign Minister Anthony Eden found him a delightful character: Eden enjoyed visiting Blum at the French Premier's lovely home on the Isle Saint-Louis in Paris. There the two of them passed pleasant moments admiring the rare volumes in Blum's fine library. Eventually, they became friends, enjoying, as Eden remembered it, a remarkably cordial relationship.[6] An enthusiast of rare books, no doubt Eden could also be counted on to be a good patriot, even if it meant making a few financial sacrifices.

The problem with Bronner's book is that, for all its valuable theoretical insights and logical distinctions, in important respects it remains ahistorical. Notions like the class ideal may well contribute importantly to the future of socialist politics, but not unless the history of efforts to apply similar ideals is genuinely confronted. In the current climate, it is the fashion to dismiss Leninism as a failure or condemn it as a proto-Stalinist perversion of Marxism. No doubt there is an element of truth in each of these claims. That truth, however, is not usefully revealed by elegant but ahistorical theoretical attacks. And there are other truths, too, which have to do with Lenin's positive contribution — truths which these days historians alone are likely to remember. There is the legacy of Lenin's political combativeness, his internationalism, his clear-headed understanding of the essential barbarism of

[5]Helmut Gruber, *Léon Blum, French Socialism, and the Popular Front: A Case of Internal Contradictions* (Ithaca 1986), 51-2.

[6]For Blum's relations with Eden, see Colton, *Blum*, 204.

capitalist civilization, and his recognition that the transition to socialism would involve a political crisis of major proportions. Here his contributions were very much greater than those of Léon Blum.

No one can deny that the history of socialism is piled high with the wreckage of disappointed hopes and tarnished ideals. What is less clear is that Leninism is any more responsible for this state of affairs than is social democracy. In 1843, the young Marx called for "a *ruthless criticism of everything existing*, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be."[7] If socialism's future is to be an improvement over its past, historians and others will have to take up just this critical attitude toward the whole of socialist history. Stephen Bronner certainly does adopt this position, and his book is an important effort in critical reflection. But at crucial moments Bronner's vision fails him and important reaches of the socialist experience are never adequately explored.

[7]Marx to Arnold Ruge, September 1843, quoted in Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition (New York 1978), 13. Emphasis in the original.