DEFENDING THE MARXIST PERSPECTIVE

In a neglected book, it is argued by David Selbourne that the project of socialism is historically exhausted.(1) He contends that the various forms of socialism have not been able to develop a coherent analysis of society. The result is that they do not understand the character of the capital-labour relation. This means that it is not recognised that the majority of the working class considers that its wellbeing is connected to capitalism. Hence the conception of the role of working people as an oppositional force within society is misconceived. The occasional conflict between capital and labour is not an expression of a tendency towards the socialist transformation of society. Instead what is occurring is the attempt of labour to obtain improvement in its relations with capital. This means the Marxist perspective of the emancipation of society by the activity of labour is false. Instead the working class aspires to enhance its social conditions within capitalism. This means the working class shares the values of capitalism such as self-reliance, individual improvement, and primarily liberty rather than equality. The bourgeois view that self-interest is not selfishness is shared by many working class people. In other words the ideological values of many people are compatible with the standpoint of the market. This is specifically expressed in the fact that individual appropriation – or private wealth-making is not questioned by the working class: “Instead the belief in the legitimacy of exclusive individual appropriation – not just possession or consumption – has not merely survived in the modern working class but has been constantly strengthened and generalized, to the point of being very near to a political and moral universal in the culture. Indeed it constitutes the principled reason why the ethics of capitalist accumulation, however obnoxious to middle class socialists in particular, cannot be and never have been called into question by the working class movement.”(2)

This description of working class consciousness seems a plausible explanation that outlines why socialism has not become the dominant standpoint within the ranks of labour. What is subject to question is the implicit connected view that this situation can never change. Selbourne is suggesting that the role of bourgeois ideology can never be challenged, or even modified. He contends that this standpoint is unalterable, and therefore the only conclusion that can be made is that capitalism will not be questioned by the views or actions of the working class. He concludes in dogmatic fashion that the approach of individual appropriation cannot be undermined by an oppositional perspective. Selbourne also argues that socialism has had many limitations because of the failure to tackle the ideological approach of labour. The struggles of labour have been about individual self-improvement, or the aspiration for autonomy, rather than militant collective goals. This description of the consciousness of labour may be accurate, but it is dogmatic to assume that this description is permanent. The point is that labour is exploited by capital. This situation may not be recognised because of the ideological reasons provided by Selbourne, but it still entirely possible that individualist aspirations can be superseded by collective recognition of the subordinated character of labour. Indeed, it is possible to suggest that at important moments in history, such as 1926, the 1970's, 1984-85, or the late 1980's, the activity of the working class did assume this collective character. These moments coincided with attempts to intensify the exploitation of labour. Thus it was possible for militant response by labour to develop. However, this collective activity did not result in socialism because of the lack of popular belief in this aim. Instead scepticism about the validity of socialism meant that the perspective of labour was still about obtaining concessions within the capitalist system. Hence it has proved vital for Marxists to provide arguments about socialism that will be more convincing and popular. But despite this problem it is a caricature to suggest that the working class is too individualistic to become conscious supporters of collective activity. Instead we could argue that the working class consists of complex views such as individualism and collectivism, which are often in contradiction, but which also can be complementary. However, trade union struggles will not in and of themselves by sufficient to bring about the transformation of society. This is why a revolutionary consciousness is also necessary. But the enduring influence of the values of capital need not represent an impediment to the development of views that are genuinely compatible with the revolutionary transformation of society.

Selbourne outlines various reasons why socialists often provide flawed and dogmatic reasons why working people do not support opposition to capitalism. But he ignores the most important reason that makes people reluctant to become socialists, which is that it may involve dedication and involvement that could be detrimental in relation to other aspects of social activity. This is why left-wing groups often remain small in size and unable to become mass organisations. The point is that capitalism has the advantage of being the present dominant system. This results in inertia and acceptance of what is instead of aspiring to realise what could be. People consider it more practical and realistic to strive for improvements within the system, and so reject the more ambitious and audacious alternative of attempting to overthrow the system. In this situation of acceptance of the status quo it seems realistic and sensible to accommodate to the actuality of capitalism. In this manner the majority of trade union agitation becomes about obtaining modest improvements in working conditions. These reasons limiting the ambitions of struggle seem to be more important than Selbourne's view that socialism is a dogmatic view devised by the middle class in order to promote the emancipation of the working class. The point is that socialism is not undermined by its supposed elitism, although that did become the problem of the Russian revolution. Instead we can provide plenty of examples from ordinary daily activity that imply the necessity of socialism in order to improve the conditions of the majority of the people. Hence socialism is not an arbitrary and effectively imaginary doctrine. It is instead based on the unity of social practice with theory. But even this explanatory validity does not mean that its theoretical premises will become realised. Instead that possibility depends on the conscious actions of people who have become convinced of the argument for socialism. But it is very difficult to mobilise people in support of this aim. It is more possible to obtain support for reforms and improvements of the existing system. This is precisely why Marxists need to develop a convincing strategy that encourages the mass struggle for socialism. However, even with this development there are no guarantees of the inevitable popular opposition to capitalism.

In other words, Selbourne is wrong to suggest that the middle class project an historic mission onto the working class in order to change society.(3) The point is that society will not be changed unless the majority of the working class become supporters of this aim. However, the fact that this development has not yet occurred in societies like the UK does not meant that this transformation is impossible. Instead it means that the arguments in favour of socialism have to become more convincing and capable of mobilising mass support. It is true that this development may not occur. But this situation does not mean that capitalism has become less exploitative and amenable to progressive change. Instead discontent with the system increases, but in the absence of the role of Marxism, it can mean that this dissatisfaction acquires alienated forms such as the growth of nationalism. Hence it is a caricatured view to suggest that the working class accepts its subordination to capital. Instead capitalism survives because people are not convinced by the proposed alternatives. Indeed, it is quite possible that many people do not know what is meant by socialism. They accept the present because alternatives seem to be impossible. Hence people lack confidence that they can act to change the character of society. The regime of capital seems to be eternal. But these attitudes do not mean that the so-called historical mission of the working class is unrealistic. It is dogmatic to contend that the working class are the willing supporters of capital given the extent of alienation and adverse social conditions. It is not the historical mission that is mythical, but rather that the working class interprets its social situation in a manner that seems to uphold the system. This does not mean that labour supports capital, but instead that alternatives seem unrealistic and beyond the capacity of human action. Such an attitude is encouraged by many failures in the attempts to overcome the domination of capital. There is a history behind the influence of bourgeois ideology.

Selbourne contends that it is wrong to equate disputes about individual rights of appropriation with the role of the class struggle. This view is probably true to the extent that many disputes between the forces of capital and labour are modest and of a small scale. But the point is that at some point it is possible for these disputes to acquire more important dimensions, as with the 1984-85 miners’ strike. This became a struggle about the very future of the working class, and involved issues of power and was connected to the success or failure of the strategy of the government. Consequently it is a caricature to deny the importance of the different interests of capital and labour. It is true that these contradictory interests may not be articulated for considerable periods of time, but the very impulse for capital to intensify exploitation of labour, is likely at some point to create a response. Capital can only maintain its domination of the economy by inflicting defeats upon labour, and labour can only uphold its interests by resisting these developments. Hence the class struggle is not a figment of the imagination of socialists, but is instead an expression of the very character of social reality.

Selbourne accepts this situation as eternal because he argues that abolition of the exploitation of labour, which relies on the role of the division of labour, is impossible: “Indeed, since the whole structure of society, whether under socialism or capitalism, must always rest on the backs of working class labour, the working class can only be more or less exploited. And of the two major forms of economy which historical evolution has produced, one does precisely this in the name of capital, the other in the name of labour.”(4) He is suggesting that the very technological character of the productive forces means that it is impossible to end the subordinated role of labour. Furthermore, he maintains that labour accepts this situation. Marxists must reject this pessimistic approach. Instead we can develop arguments that indicate that labour has the capacity and ability to overcome the domination of capital within the relations of production, and instead can create an economic situation in which labour is able to define the process of promoting the organisation and development of the output of goods. Hence it is necessary to reject any suggestion that capitalism is too complex for industrial democracy to be successful, and instead it is necessary to argue that the co-operative character of labour can realise a situation in which the alienated character of the present relations of production is overcome. Selbourne can reject these conclusions because he does regard industrial work as inherently alienating and degrading. Hence his approach is one of technological determinism, which does imply that the more sophisticated is work, the more difficult it will be to overcome a situation of exploitation and the subordination of labour to the imperatives of management.(5) He is rejecting the view that human ingenuity and rationality can overcome the alienating imperatives of capital. But the outcome of this standpoint is to become a reluctant supporter of capital against labour.

Thus it is not surprising that the only basis of emancipation can be to advocate individual autonomy.(6) There is no social or collective emancipation that overcomes the domination of capital, instead only the ability of the isolated individual to become a small owner brings about liberation. The majority of the working class will still be exploited by capital. Furthermore, this situation is historically unchangeable. This perspective is not an attractive one, but is justified in the dubious terms that labour accepts its domination by capital. In contrast to this pessimistic view, Marxism provides a more optimistic and collective project of human and universal emancipation. It argues that the exploitation of labour by capital is not eternal and can be overcome. However, labour has to consciously act if this aim is to be realised. It is this task which is the most difficult to accomplish. This difficulty is not because labour is convinced supporters of the principles of capital, but is instead primarily because people are not convinced by the validity of socialism as an alternative. Hence the argument for socialism is possibly the most important task of Marxism. We have to provide effective reasons why people should reject capitalism and instead become supporters of socialism. Unfortunately this task has been neglected by many Marxist groups who have a crude version of what is meant by socialism. The result of this situation is that there is little support for socialism within society.

Selbourne contends that the trade unions act to establish through collective bargaining gains that correspond to the role of the market. This connects with the defence of the principles of private appropriation, and in conditions of the decline of capitalism this means the attempt to maintain gains and opposition to the attempts of capital to undermine the bargaining rights of labour. Hence capital is using advantageous market conditions in order to establish the possibility for an offensive against labour. (7) This is essentially an accurate description of the offensive of capital against the material conditions of labour since the 1980's. Selbourne suggests that this conflict will not result in the promotion of class struggle because labour is concerned with its gains established under the market system. The situation does not correspond to the hopes of socialists that what is occurring is the development of the process of the advance of socialism: “But what such critics are observing is a small part of a much larger complexity: the political and economic brokerage of private labour interests in a socio-economic order whose fundamental legitimacy was long ago accepted.”(8)

What is being described is the beginning of conflict between capital and labour. In most circumstances the various types of industrial dispute will be about collective bargaining issues that do not go beyond the limits of confrontation in the sphere of arguments about the share of the market. But Selbourne's approach is based on the dogmatic view that this situation can never become transformed into a higher form of class struggle. This is because he considers that labour has a character that cannot go beyond accommodation to capital and the continuation of the system of market rewards. The assumption is that labour is prepared to accept its subordination to capital as an expression of the definitive character of social reality. But we know from the bitterness of the miner's strike that disputes between capital and labour can acquire political implications and acquire the character of differences about the very manner in which society is organised and administered. The point is that the period of the boom meant that labour was generally content to improve its market conditions because it could materially benefit from the continuation of the capitalist system. However, with the onset of recession in the 1980's struggles between capital and labour became more polarised and intense. This meant class struggle whilst defensive was also about the very character of the economic organisation of society. Marxists did not invent the class struggle; instead it was connected to the declining conditions of the capitalist system. In these circumstances the consciousness of the working class was no longer typified by acceptance of capitalism and instead was increasingly oppositional. The ideas of Marxism received a response in the 1980's. The forces of capital were victorious in this situation not because of the apparent acceptance by labour of its domination, but rather because the role of the state was effective and was able to undermine collective resistance and opposition to the system. It has been difficult to organise opposition against capitalism since the 1980's because of the serious nature of the defeat of the forces of labour in this period. However, the declining nature of capitalism continues and so any revival of militancy is likely to result in the promotion of opposition to the economic system. Hence Selbourne's conception of a working class that accepts its subordination to capital is a caricature of reality.

The ultimate problem with the approach of Selbourne is that he denies the possibility to overcome the subordination of labour within either capitalism or socialism.(9) He is implying that the present economic system, or a possible socialist alternative, are so complicated and complex which means that emancipation of the working class cannot be realised. Marxists reject this pessimism. We would argue that the very co-operative character of labour means that it is possible to realise forms of democratic organisation of the relations of production. Indeed it could be argued that both capitalism and bureaucratic forms of so-called socialism, are based on the aim of preventing the forces of labour from realising the creative and democratic organisation of the economy. Selbourne considers this situation to be eternal, and this is why his argument is preoccupied with presenting an understanding that labour can never overcome its subordination. He maintains that: “Instead, the belief, utopian in entirely familiar ways, persists undaunted that there might someday, or somewhere, exist a “real” socialist democratic planning system which could dispense simultaneously with market, bureaucracy and hierarchy, based upon some undefined form of mass democracy.”(10) This view is pessimistic because the attempt to replace capitalism in a democratic manner has been undermined not by the problem of economic complexity, but instead because of a process of the political degeneration of revolutionary regimes. This has meant that the working class has never been in a position to be able to define its own class interests in terms of the promotion of a participatory economy and political society. Instead the process of revolution has been distorted by the influence of bureaucratic elites who have defined their own narrow interpretation of socialism in terms of the rule of a single party and the creation of a centralised nationalised economy. In this context the possibility to establish industrial democracy has not been realised, and instead the economy is organised in hierarchical terms. Hence the problem is not the supposed practical limitations of socialism because a principled form of socialism has never been established. In this sense the actual possible limitations of socialism have never been tested, and the credibility of genuine socialism is still an unknown quality. It could be that socialism is an unreal or utopian project, but this evaluation can only be the result of an extensive period of genuine industrial democracy in relation to the formation of a principled revolutionary regime. However, we cannot deny the credibility of socialism by equating it with Stalinism, in the manner argued by Selbourne. Stalinism is actually anti-socialist because it perpetuated the subordination of the working class within the relations of production. Only when the working class becomes hegemonic will it be possible to establish whether socialism is a project that is realistic or utopian.

Selbourne's alternative to the aspiration for socialism is to strive to realise civil rights, greater democracy and progress in overcoming discrimination. (11) But he makes the argument in favour of his perspective in anti-socialist terms: “Instead, we stand at the end of an historical epoch for the left, since the struggle for freedom and the struggle for socialism are no longer capable of being considered as necessarily connected, let alone as synonymous. In fact, it is because all this is so that socialist theory has even been more gradually disarmed from making that most crucial of all political and moral distinctions between the freedom of the individual as a merely entrepreneurial means, and the integrity of the person as a fundamental human value.”(12) The anti-individualism of the Left, because of the association of the role of the individual with capital accumulation, means that they are reluctant to defend the human rights of the individual. Thus it is necessary to break with socialism if the civil rights of people as individuals is to be defended.

This criticism of socialist ideology may have some relevance, but the Left has become the most principled supporters of civil rights. Indeed we would argue that only under socialism can the wellbeing of the individual, in terms of rights and potentialities, truly flourish. It is possible to be a creative individual without exploiting other human beings. This would be one of the most important themes of a truly principled socialist society. In contrast, capitalism undermines the individuality of many people in the name of the imperatives of capital accumulation. This is why Selbourne's defence of the individual can only be fully realised in an authentic socialist society. He cannot recognise this point because in the last analysis his approach is based on the acceptance of the eternal durability of the regime of capital. This is why he rejects the potential for class struggle to transform society and bring about a new type of social formation. However, his conception of the permanent accommodation of labour to the aims of capital is pessimistic and superficial. Instead the last forty years has indicated that capital can only survive by intensifying the exploitation of labour. This situation has led to a response, and in various periods has led to the radicalisation of the working class. The argument for socialism is related to the fact that capitalism is increasingly a system of ferocious exploitation and the generation of poverty. It cannot provide any optimistic conceptions of a better future. In this situation, Marxism and socialism is still relevant, rather than being historically exhausted, as Selbourne argues. Socialism may be a utopian doctrine, but this issues is still to be resolved in terms of whether working people are able to establish a more efficient and democratic society than capitalism. Selbourne has accepted the victory of capital. Principled Marxists will not support his claim, and instead contend that there are many valid reasons to continue to struggle for socialism.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)David Selbourne: Against Socialist Illusion Macmillan Press, London 1984

(2) ibid p52-53

(3) p72-73

(4) ibid p89

(5) ibid p93-95

(6) ibid p98

(7) ibid p158-170

(8) ibid p199

(9) ibid p219-220

(10) ibid p222

(11) ibid p243-254

(12) ibid p244-245