

Synopsis and Critique of Axel Honneth's, *Idea of Socialism*

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In 2018 at a colloquium at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, I debated Axel Honneth (successor to Jürgen Habermas as Director of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt) about his book, *The Idea of Socialism*. These are rough notes I compiled after the debate:

Honneth asks in the Introduction to his book: Why has the idea of socialism withered and what can we do to revitalize it? This generates three further questions. As a consequence, the main body of *The Idea of Socialism* has a simple, three part structure. It asks: 1) What is the normative (ethical) core of socialism? 2) What went wrong in its implementation? and 3) How do we fix the problem? There are four chapters, but the final two are attempts to answer the third question.

Honneth limits himself to works by early socialists: Owen, Saint Simon, Fourier, Proudhon, and Marx, although he also mentions Louis Blanc and August Blanqui. Why this limitation? His claim is that there is a core idea present in the socialist tradition from its beginning that persists unaltered by its further development. And there is also a kind of original sin that distorts expression of the core idea, and so must be expiated, so to speak.

In answering 1) Honneth develops the idea of social freedom as the normative core of socialism. The idea, as present in the work of the founders, is an attempt to reconcile the Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity of the French Revolution. The liberal freedom of the self-interested individual to act in the market by entering into mutually voluntary contracts undermines fraternity (or solidarity) and equality. But the idea of social freedom also rejects the liberalism of Kant and Rousseau insofar these two thinkers identify freedom with autonomy, the rational self-determination of the individual actor. Socialism claims that the freedom of the individual (best understood, as far as I can tell, as the idea of autonomy), can be realized only through cooperative relations with others. In such relations, individuals act not merely with one another, but for one another. They share a concern for advancing the freedom of others as more than an instrument of advancing their own freedom. (Rational choice theory is not applicable here). Socialism is a communal “form of life” (an expression of Wittgenstein’s that caught on in Frankfurt School critical theory) involving shared norms and goals. But it doesn’t require small face-to-face communities. Even large scale,

anonymous societies count as communities as long as their members share a minimal set of norms and goals (cites Anderson's book, *Imaginary Communities*).

Critique: I like the idea of social freedom very much, but I think that it leaves the question of what the freedom of the individual is that social freedom advances at best with only a vague answer (autonomy?). The early socialists had several more substantive conceptions of individual freedom: freedom as associative attraction that liberates and satisfies sexual and other desires (Fourier); freedom as the full unfolding of human powers and sensibilities (Marx); freedom as free time, time beyond the limits of the working day (Marx); freedom as freedom from material want (Owen); and freedom as the enjoyment of work in the creation of beauty (Morris).

It is in answering 2) that the book goes wrong. H. claims that the problems of post-WW2 socialism stem from the fact that the founders were limited by the presuppositions of "Manchester capitalism," in other words, the early Industrial Revolution. There are three of them: A) The economy is the sole "sphere" of society that acts as its "steering principle." (The language is from the sociologist, Nicolas Luhmann). As a consequence, the sole task of socialists is to create social freedom in the economy. B) History has a predetermined outcome in the sense that socialism is the next, inevitable phase of social development. C) The industrial proletariat has an objective interest corresponding with socialist goals. It is inherently revolutionary.

Critique: A) is definitely wrong for Fourier, about half of whose major work, *Theory of the Four Movements*, concerns analyzing the family, the oppression of women, and the causes of sexual frustration, and getting beyond all three by reconstructing social relations in the "phalanx." By the way, the phalanx is an agricultural community, not an industrial one as H. seems to think. Except for his early work ("The relation between man and woman is the index of the general alienation of society." – 1844 Manuscripts), Marx neglected these issues. But Engels did not (*Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* – H's three spheres!), nor did latter-day socialists such as Alexandra Kollontai and Emma Goldman. B) is at best an overstatement. There are some sentences in Marx that describe socialism as the inevitable next step in historical development, most obviously an explicit assertion to this effect in the *Communist Manifesto*. But the *Manifesto* was a work of propaganda, however brilliant, and you don't fire up the troops by telling them that they may or may not win. Even then, the *Manifesto* says that the history of class society is marked by struggles in which one class prevails over another, or there is a "mutual ruin of the contending classes." Rosa

Luxemburg followed in this vein by developing the slogan, “Socialism or barbarism!” There are also passages in Marx where he writes that the later social form is not the goal of the earlier one (*German Ideology*), and that history involves multiple alternative pathways (letters to Vera Zasulich). With respect to C) the class of wage-workers *does* have an “objective interest.” Its members want more money for less work as well as protection against unemployment, catastrophic medical expenses, etc. They also want to be treated with respect for the contribution they make to the general good. The number of workers who do not share this complex interest is statistically insignificant. If the interest of workers can be satisfied in a capitalist society, then it does not require an attempt to create a socialist one. Otherwise, workers do indeed have an objective interest in replacing capitalism with socialism. In addition, for the past century at least, no reputable socialist that I know of has argued that the proletariat is inherently revolutionary. At most, socialists have said that workers have a capacity for revolutionary behavior that is activated under certain definite historical circumstances, something that has been demonstrated time and again - in England during the Chartist movement, Russia in 1905 and 1917, Germany and Hungary in 1919, Italy in 1920 and again from 1968-1976, in parts of Spain in 1936, in Portugal in 1974-5, in France in 1968, in Iran in 1975, etc. Whether they retain this capacity after the neoliberal reorganization of labor has yet to be decided. But whether or not the working class will fulfill its revolutionary “destiny,” it is the only group in society that can overthrow capitalism for a very simple reason. *It creates capital with its labor*. When it withdraws its labor for a sufficient period of time, capitalist enterprise collapses. Whether it can construct an alternative, socialist system depends upon multiple factors: its level of political and technical education, its strategic and tactical intelligence, its ability to overcome internal divisions, and the creation of what Gramsci called a “hegemonic bloc” that includes a good part of the professional and technological middle class, including business professionals.

H’s “master narrative” is that, shortly after WW2, the developed countries became post-industrial as the industrial proletariat fell to less than half of all wage earners, being progressively replaced by a largely unorganizable “service proletariat.” However, socialists remained wedded to the presuppositions of industrialism, and so failed to adapt to changed circumstances.

Critique: The industrial proletariat was always less than half the number of wage earners. Even now, the absolute number of industrial workers in the “developed countries” is much the same as it has been since its peak in the 1970s, although it represents a smaller percentage of the economically active population. And on a global scale, there are far more industrial workers in the world today than there

were forty years ago. Consider China, India, and Vietnam. And who says that the service proletariat is unorganizable? That would come as news to the second largest union in the US, Service Employees International Union. There are undeniable difficulties organizing retail and food service workers, but many janitors, clerical workers for federal and state agencies, teachers, etc. are already represented by unions.

My counter-narrative is that the beginning of the crisis of socialism was the mid-1970s in which the global economy experienced its first major recession since the end of the war. The recession was merely the start of a secular trend involving a fall in the rate of profit, due, I believe, to overcapacity, e.g., too many auto factories in the US, Germany, Italy, Japan, and now China in relation to global demand (see Robert Brenner's work). It was the end of the post-war boom that had made the social compromise between capital and labor possible. Under the terms of the compromise, big corporations accepted unions as collective bargaining agents as well as the high rates of taxation necessary to sustain the US version of the welfare state created by the New Deal and Great Society. In exchange, unions gave up demands to nationalize industry and agreed that corporate managers would exercise exclusive control of the work process. But in the mid-70s, the corporate owners and their state apparatus called off the post-war compromise in an effort to recuperate rates of profit. Under Thatcher and Reagan, the neoliberal strategy was developed and implemented, replacing welfare state Keynesianism. Supply side economics was all the rage, Milton Freeman and the Austria school serving as inspiration. The highest tax bracket was lowered dramatically and the resulting fiscal crisis used as an excuse to dismantle social programs. Finally, the state put an end to labor militancy, represented most dramatically by the wildcat strikes of the 1970s. It signaled that corporations should provoke strikes and decertify unions when Thatcher broke the miners' strike and Reagan that of the air traffic controllers. Combine that with neoliberal trade deals, offshoring, etc. The result was a massive re-composition of the working class, globally as well as nationally that both fragmented it (the rise of contingent work) and reintegrated the fragments in global supply chains, satellite parts assembly, and just-in-time delivery systems. Rates of unionization fell dramatically as a result, and the socialist parties increasingly abandoned their working-class base in favor of middle class voters. They became slightly more "progressive" versions of neoliberalism than the center-right parties, and sometimes not even that.

3) The last of Honneth's questions is: How do we restore something of the power and attraction of the idea of socialism? His answer is that we must abandon the three presuppositions of a socialism overly influenced by industrial society, and

replace them with new ones capable of serving in their place. A) He thinks that a supposedly exclusive emphasis on the economy must be replaced by an attempt to introduce social freedom into all three functionally differentiated spheres: economy, family, and polity. B) The idea is that socialism as the necessary successor of capitalism must give way to an experimental approach inspired by John Stuart Mill and John Dewey. We don't know to what extent we will be able to get along without the market, and so must introduce economic reforms pointing beyond the market slowly and with an eye to learning from our mistakes. H. is an agnostic about the market, in contrast with Habermas who argues that the market is indispensable in our complex, functionally differentiated societies. C) We need to get past the presupposition that the proletariat is the privileged agent of socialist transformation. But we also cannot rely on other social movements, which come and go. Instead, the socialist project must be grounded in institutional changes that point in a socialist direction, e.g., political rights and welfare-state reforms. The addressee of socialists is neither the working class nor the new social movements, but rather the "citizen." In addition to its experimentalism, socialism must present itself as a democratic "form of life." This is because there must be a central steering principle that coordinates the three spheres. For H., this can only be the "public sphere" in which social movements act from time to time, and citizens with political rights propose solutions to the problems they face.

Critique: A) I'm sympathetic to the idea that functional differentiation is a part of modernity. For example, capitalism demands the relative autonomy of economy and state, in contrast with feudalism, for example, where economic relations and political relations are one and the same. Something similar is true, at least tendentially, regarding the family, and, as I pointed out to H., the educational system, which he does not mention (he conceded this point). The triad of family, economy, and polity is the result of his over-reliance on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. But I think he takes this functional differentiation too far in the direction of mutual autonomy, first because the different functional spheres are products of capitalist development, and second because the imperatives of the economy, including the interests of the capitalist class, shape the other three spheres. Still, I'm all for expanding social freedom in all of them. B) All attempts at creating socialism have been experimental, *de facto*, beginning with Lenin's New Economic Policy. Contrary to H., the British historian, Eric Hobsbawm points out that the Soviet model of a centralized command economy is not in Marx, but rather an adaptation of the model of German production during WW1 to conditions in the early Soviet Union (*The Age of Extremes*). C) What sense does it make to say that socialists cannot base themselves in social movements (let alone the workers' movement) but must rely on the institutional "traces" of socialist advance, when

these traces are the products of past movements? H. wants to say that there is a tendency in history that moves in the direction of socialism. What is this but a version of the historical determinism he rejects? In fact, it is the Ghost of Hegel, who understands the trend toward the development of freedom as occurring behind the backs of historical actors (the cunning of Reason). And, while the oppression of women, Black people, etc. is no less deserving of moral regard and social remediation than that of workers, the working class is the only group in society that has the strategic location necessary for getting beyond capitalism, as I have already argued. This does not mean that it *will* get beyond it, or that it can get beyond it without involving other classes and social strata. But if it fails to lead a transition, then, in light of imperialist war, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and the ecological crisis that are by-products of capitalism, we are all in very deep trouble.