Further correspondence on socialism and human nature

Nick Beams
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Dear Editor,

I am disappointed by the response, it doesn't seem to fulfill the promise of the headline, "An exchange on socialism and human nature". As far as socialism goes, being for it myself, I largely share your positions. It is on human nature that I find your position lacking. Socialism is a choice of social organisation which takes into account the increased socialisation of human activity since primitive communism. You speak a good deal about the thoughts of illustrious men on property, which they consider necessary or not, but you do not speak of human nature.

The only passage where this question is approached is in regard to Rousseau, who observed that in a state of nature the right to property does not exist; then you proceed to the conception that private property lies at the source of inequality, crimes, war and murder. But it is precisely to this that one must have an answer. Does the transition from non-property to its appropriation and, as a result, to a society organised for the preservation of the property acquired result from human nature or not? When I watch a small child who defends his toys, I wonder. And even more so when he wants to get hold of those belonging to his friend to whom he refuses "his" own.

Warmly,

RP

Dear RP,

Thank you for your e-mail on socialism and human nature for it provides us with the opportunity to go further into this important question.

The argument of the proponents of the "free market" and capitalist ownership of the means of production is that socialism is "unnatural" and therefore doomed to failure because it violates the inherent drive in every human being towards the exclusive ownership of property. Your example of children and their toys, to which I shall return, indicates that you lean in this direction or are at least influenced by the argument.

In the first chapter of *Capital*, in his analysis of the "fetishism of commodities," Marx explained that one of the great difficulties we face in coming to an understanding of society is that it has already undergone a considerable development before we come to try analyse it.

"Man's reflections on the forms of social life," he wrote, "and consequently, also, his scientific analysis of those forms, take a course directly opposite to that of their actual historical development. He begins, post festum, with the results of the process of development ready to hand before him."

In other words, analysis begins with categories and forms of thought already at hand, under conditions where the historical processes which gave rise to these forms is obscured from view. Hence these forms of thought are not understood as the product of historical processes, but seem to spring from the "inner nature" of man himself.

Consider, for example, the question of interest. Nothing seems more "natural" than that there should be a payment or interest charged on the use of money. It is considered "unnatural" to think otherwise. Yet for hundreds of years there were denunciations of usury and severe punishments inflicted for its practice.

It would take much more time and space available here to go into all the issues surrounding the emergence of capitalism from the crisis and breakdown of the feudal order.

Let me just point to the main issues. Since the disappearance of "primitive communism", human society has been divided into classes. The essential social relation in all class societies, and the key to understanding its anatomy, is the way in which the ruling classes extract surplus labour from the exploited classes.

In feudal society, this appropriation of surplus labour takes place through political means—a system of laws, backed up by force, and sanctioned by the authority of the Church (which itself forms part of the ruling class). The peasant or serf has to render a definite amount of labour, either directly, or indirectly in the form of produce, to the lord.

Feudal society, however, did not just involve a series of obligations to the landowners and the Church. The exploited classes also acquired certain common lands for the planting of crops and the grazing of animals. Moreover, the peasants or serfs also owned the means of production which sustained them.

In capitalist society the extraction of surplus labour does not take place through political means, but economically. That is, while there were a myriad of laws in feudal society which spelt out the obligations of the peasant, there are no such laws under capitalism. There is no statute which compels the worker to sell his or her labour power to the owner of capital. He or she is forced to do so by the pressure of economic necessity. And that compulsion arises from the fact that, unlike the peasant or small producer in feudal society, the worker in capitalist society has been completely separated from the means of production.

Therefore the crucial question to be examined in the transition from feudalism to capitalism is how this transformation took place.

That is, how it was that a class of free wage labourers emerged—free both from feudal obligations and from the means of production—with nothing to sell but their labour power.

History shows that this transformation did not result from some innate human nature, but was the outcome of new forms of social organisation based on the market. Those who maintain that the emergence of capitalism is the result of some inherent drive to own private property can never answer the question as to why the transition to capitalism took place between the 16th and 18th centuries. If it is all a question of human nature then why not earlier, or why not later?

One of the most important battles in the development of capitalism was the establishment of *exclusive* property rights, above all in land, over the common property rights which had played such a central role in the lives of the peasantry under feudalism. Far from expressing some inherent human characteristic, manifesting itself at a very young age, this new form of property had to establish itself against the conception that land should be held in common and its fruits available to all.

The role of John Locke was to forge the necessary ideological weapons for the emergence of this new capitalist society.

In the words of the Canadian political theorist C. B. Macpherson: "Locke begins by accepting, as the dictate both of natural reason and of Scripture, that the earth and its fruits were originally given to mankind in common. This was of course the traditional view, found alike in Medieval and in seventeenth-century Puritan theory. But Locke accepts this position only to refute the conclusions previously drawn from it, which had made property something less than a natural individual right.

"'But this [that the earth was given to mankind in common] being supposed,' Locke wrote, 'it seems to some a very great difficulty, how any one should ever come to have a *Property* in any thing ... I shall endeavour to show, how Men might come to have *property* in several parts of that which God gave to Mankind in common, and that without any express Compact of the Commoners'" [C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* pp. 199-200].

In other words the forms of property, based on exclusion, which are considered as emanating from human nature today, were once regarded as so "unnatural" that they had to be argued for.

The example you cite of a small child defending his toys and trying to get hold of those belonging to his friend does not demonstrate the innate character of the drive for private property. Rather, it shows how rapidly, and at what an early stage, the mores of a given society start to determine behaviour.

The type of behaviour you describe is exhibited by children in a definite type of society. In others forms of society children, just as "naturally", share their possessions. Or rather, things are not seen as individual possessions but as being available for common use and enjoyment.

In any case the issue of personal property and possessions has really nothing to do with the establishment of socialism.

"The distinguishing feature of Communism," Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, "is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois property." That is the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production.

"Capital," he continued, "is a collective product, and only by the united action of many members, nay, in the last resort, only by the united action of all members of society, can it be set in motion." If Marx's remarks had something of an anticipatory character in 1848, then they are absolutely true today in the era of vast transnational companies which are owned not by individuals but through the accumulation of resources on a global scale.

The establishment of a socialist society will not see the instant resolution of all the problems confronting mankind. But it will establish the only social framework through which they can be tackled.

What brought about the demise of feudal society, with its obligations on the one hand and common property rights on the other, was that it stood as a barrier to the further development of the productive forces, which required new property forms. Today, the new forms of technology are incompatible with the private appropriation of wealth. Science requires the free exchange of information and knowledge. But capital seeks to subject it to copyright and patents—even the knowledge of the genetic structure of mankind itself.

The rise of new forms of communication based on the Internet depends on the sharing of information for the mutual benefit of all. Music and entertainment resources available on the Web benefit the individual the more they are shared. Computer software programs are improved and developed to the extent they can be shared and adapted. Capital, however, attempts to block such processes, not because of some innate property of human nature, but because its acquisition of profit depends on property rights.

In the socialist society of the future in which the productive resources are owned in common and democratically controlled, knowledge will be shared because in this way the wealth of all can be increased. And the conceptions of property right which appear so "natural" today will be regarded as completely anachronistic.

Yours sincerely,

Nick Beams