

Some questions and answers on life under socialism

Nick Beams
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Dear Mr Beams,

I enjoy reading the WSWS as an alternative source of news. While your website speaks of the need for a socialist reorganisation of society, there unfortunately appears to be little information or comment on life in socialist society. A practical vision of life in socialist society could excite the imagination of the reader and would greatly increase support for your cause. Practical issues that could be addressed are:

1. How do you ensure efficient production of goods and services while maintaining full employment?
2. How does the socialist society know what the economic needs and wants of the population are?
3. How do people remain motivated to work effectively when they know they will be supported by the people? In other words, how does the system guard against laziness and abuse of social benefits?
4. How is initiative and good work rewarded?
5. How is wealth and technical expertise channelled into the developing world to meet the needs of the people there?
6. Is there a role for the dynamic of small businesses, where individuals can run a small business to meet the wants of the local community, which larger business entities cannot meet effectively, for example restaurants and small shops?
7. How does government operate and how do people contribute to decision-making and at what levels? Where would a world capital be?
8. What set of values, would form the basis of morality in society?
9. How will socialist society work to strengthen the family?
10. Many youth today are disillusioned and lack personal vision, which partially explains the drug problem plaguing many western countries. What ideals or activities will inspire these youth to fulfill their potential?
11. What safeguards will stop the revolution from degenerating into an oppressive state with gross violations of human rights?
12. Will environmental and sustainability considerations be incorporated into the cost of business inputs and product cycle costing?

The work of Marx and Engels was produced during the industrial revolution during the mid to late 19th century. We are now in the information revolution, with most workers employed in service industries. Did Marx and Engels anticipate the rise of modern consumer capitalism and the service economy? I would appreciate to know how you would expect the development of the information-driven services based economy to proceed in the future with respect to employment levels, real wages, the type of employment (part-time/full-time) and social inequality.

Regards,

GS

Dear GS,

The first point I would make in reply to your series of questions is that they are based on a false understanding of socialism. Not surprisingly, given the decades-long domination of Stalinism and the bureaucratic “state socialism” of the social democratic parties in the capitalist countries, they have been framed on the basis that socialist society

involves the establishment of a political authority which then directs economic and social organisation.

The development of a socialist society will not take place according to a series of prescriptions and rules laid down by an individual, a political party or a governmental authority. Rather, it will develop on the basis of the activity of the members of society who, for the first time in history, consciously regulate and control their own social organisation as part of their daily lives, free from the domination and prescriptions of either the “free market” or a bureaucratic authority standing over and above them.

In one of his earliest writings Marx made clear that “only when man has recognised and organised his own powers as social forces, and consequently no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of political power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished” (Marx, *On the Jewish Question*, Collected Works, Volume 3, p. 168).

This was a perspective that guided him throughout his life. In one of his later writings he explained that the significance of the Paris Commune of 1871 was that it involved “the reabsorption of state power by society as one of its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it, by the popular masses themselves, forming their own force instead of the organised force of their own suppression—the political form of their social emancipation, instead of the artificial force appropriated by their oppressors ...” (Marx and Engels, *On the Paris Commune*, p. 153).

The precondition for such a society is the development of the social productivity of labour to such a point that the vast bulk of humanity does not have to spend the greater portion of the day merely trying to obtain the resources to maintain itself. The great contribution of capitalism to the advance of human civilisation is that through its continuous development of the productive forces, and the productivity of labour, it has created the necessary material foundations for such genuine human emancipation.

This brings me to the last point of your e-mail—the impact of the so-called information revolution. There is no question that the application of computer technology has enormously advanced mankind’s economic powers. But this very increase in the productivity of labour and the development of the productive forces on a global scale has come into conflict with the social relations of capitalism—the system of private ownership and private profit and the nation-state.

This is why the vast increase in the productive forces associated with the information revolution over the past two decades has not seen the advancement of the mass of the world’s people. Rather, it has given rise to deepening social inequality, both within and between nations, a decline in real wages and a myriad of social problems (too numerous to detail here). At the same time, we have seen the eruption of imperialist wars of conquest (the Gulf War, the war against Yugoslavia and now the global war on terror, to name only the most significant) as the major capitalist powers, and the corporations whose interests they express, engage in an increasingly desperate conflict of each against all to acquire resources, investment outlets and markets.

However, the enormous advance in the productive forces, made possible by the information revolution, has laid the basis for human emancipation.

As Trotsky put it: “The material premise of communism should be so high a development of the economic powers of man that productive labour, having ceased to be a burden, will not require any goad, and the distribution of life’s goods, existing in continual abundance, will not demand—as it does not now in any well-off family or ‘decent’ boardinghouse—any control except that of education, habit and social opinion. Speaking frankly, I think it would be pretty dull-witted to consider such a really modest perspective ‘utopian’” (Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed*, Labor Publications, Detroit, pp. 39-40).

In a situation where the major economic problem confronting the capitalist economy is not scarcity but overcapacity and overproduction it is clear that, in the period since Trotsky wrote these lines, we have come a long way towards a situation where there is a “continual abundance” of life’s goods.

But the problem remains: the productive forces, created by the collective labour of the working people of the world, are utilised not for the advancement of humanity as a whole but are subordinated to the accumulation of profit.

On the basis of these remarks let me turn to your questions.

Questions 1 and 2 are connected. In capitalist society the only way of determining economic needs and wants is through the market. Wants only become known if they are backed by effective demand—money. The development of the market broke down the particularism of earlier forms of society and represented a tremendous advance in social organisation. But the more complex the society becomes, the more inefficient is the market in determining the allocation of resources. Within the corporation, many of which are now larger than entire national economies, production is carried out through the most detailed planning—conscious control and regulation. Outside, in society as a whole, anarchy reigns. The latest example that springs to mind is the telecommunications industry. Vast investments were carried out that, from the standpoint of the individual firm, were completely rational. But as every other telecom company was making the same decision the result was the creation of overcapacity that has now led to bankruptcies totalling billions of dollars. In socialist society, the market will progressively be replaced through planning by the producers, in line with the goals set by themselves and society as a whole.

Socialist society, as Marxists have always explained, will not immediately be able to replace the market, or allocate resources on the basis of to each according to his need, while requiring only that they work according to their abilities or inclination. Incentives, in the form of higher wages, will be necessary for a period. But they will become increasingly less important under conditions where an increasing amount of goods and services are made freely available. And what if people are lazy? This question cannot be answered by setting down a series of prescriptions, but will be determined on the basis of a widely discussed economic plan. At any given period of time, out of a given population, there will be a certain number of people in the workforce, while others are studying or pursuing other interests etc. If it is found that insufficient labour is being undertaken, then society as a whole will have to make decisions to change this situation, in accordance with its needs, democratically decided on.

Furthermore in considering this question it necessary to take into account the changing nature of the production process itself. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx explained that the elimination of bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, would be replaced by “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” Such a perspective, which might perhaps have been considered somewhat “utopian” in the past, is in line with the development of technology itself. In the era of the information revolution, productivity is developed to the greatest extent under conditions where all members of society can develop their capacities to the maximum. The

development of such a society and the development of a mass political movement to fight for it will undoubtedly lead to the reduction of drug problems and other social ills.

On questions 8 and 9 concerning morality and the family, it is only possible to give a general answer. As to the question of morals, Marxism has always rejected the attempt to impose some moral dogma, pointing out that inasmuch as society has always been divided into class, morality is a class issue. Moral values either justify the interests of the ruling stratum, or represent the interests of the oppressed classes. When class society is abolished, a new morality will develop. It is impossible to say in advance of what it will consist, but we do have some anticipation. It is always noticeable in some great natural disaster or catastrophe, when the certainties of everyday life collapse, that there are many acts of self-sacrifice and courage by ordinary people, which contrast so markedly with the norms of everyday life.

As for the family, socialist society will have no prescriptions. The ways in which people choose to live will be decided by them. Under socialism, however, they will have the material means available to make such a choice both possible and meaningful.

Environmental and sustainability considerations will most certainly be taken into consideration by people as they plan and organise the economy. In fact, only under socialism, where production is not determined by profit, but regulated according to the laws of reason, will it be possible to make such decisions.

On the question of safeguards, the most important factor militating against the degeneration of the revolution into an oppressive state will be the active involvement of all members of society in its organisation and administration. Representative institutions will still be needed. Here the measures adopted by the Paris Commune have lost none of their validity—all representatives to be paid no more than the average wage and subject to recall by those who elected them.

Of course, since the short life of the Commune, we have had the much longer experience of the Soviet Union. The degeneration of the revolution into the bureaucratic oppression of Stalinism was rooted in the material conditions within which the workers’ state developed. Against all those who maintain that it was an inevitable consequence of the working class taking power, it is necessary to point out that Stalinism was not an inevitable consequence of the Russian Revolution as such, but rather of its failure to spread to the more advanced countries of Europe. The revolution remained isolated in an economically backward economy and it was this which led to the emergence of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and its usurpation of political power from the working class.

In this reply, I have only been able to briefly touch on the questions you have raised. Can I recommend that you undertake a study of Engels’ book *Anti-Duhring* and Leon Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed*? Many of the issues you raise are dealt with there.

Yours sincerely,
Nick Beams



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