

bit like the Tea Party, whose people tell us that the experts on global warming, on health care, on macroeconomics, are all lying. Yet we know that experts serve the Republican and even Tea Party causes, too. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks is no Tea Party hero, but he serves as a civilized voice for Republican outrage. Not many months before this present crisis broke out, Brooks and Harold Meyerson served as right/left discussants on the *PBS NewsHour*. Meyerson suggested that it was time for Congress to regulate banks with particular attention to derivatives. "Regulate them," Brooks scoffed. "They can't even understand them." Ah, yes, let us marvel at the brilliance of the Wall Street Masters of the Universe.

The country's wrenching hurt comes from a severe, periodic crisis in the capitalist economy. Government did fail. Its failure lay in its inability and unwillingness to rein in capitalist excess. Now people have a right to raise the most fundamental questions about how society can and should be organized, and socialists have

a duty to help formulate those questions. Why can't the richest nation in the history of the world provide decent jobs and affordable housing for all? Why can't we begin to reverse global warming? Why can't we provide health care for all our citizens? The experts who tell us that we can't afford to do these things are the same wise men (and they are mostly men) who assured us that the crisis couldn't happen because our financial system was so sophisticated. When proposals to relieve some small measure of human suffering are raised, they rally with their Tea Party compatriots to declaim that what Obama proposes is socialism.

Our response should be that although Obama's proposals deserve our critical support, his policies are not nearly that good.

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**Jack Clark** served as national secretary of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee, one of Democratic Socialists of America's parent organizations, from 1973-1979. He currently lives in Washington, D.C.

## Which Socialism?

MICHAEL WALZER

*In the not-so-distant past*, when Norberto Bobbio, the Italian political theorist, first asked this question, it was (or so it looks today) relatively easy to answer. There were only two choices: the version of socialism that prevailed in what we might think of as the Long East, which stretched from North Korea across the Soviet Union all the way to Albania, and the version that prevailed in the Short West, from the Bonn republic to the British Isles. There were differences within each of the two blocs, but the socialism of the East was everywhere marked by an authoritarian politics, with totalizing pretensions, and the socialism of the West, whether its protagonists claimed to be reformers or revolutionaries, was deeply democratic. There were leftists in the West—we called them Stalinists—who defended or apolo-

gized for the socialism of the East, but the simplest regard for human life and dignity dictated a commitment to the socialism of the West. Bobbio's strong defense of democracy, like that of the first editors of *Dissent*, signaled a commitment of exactly that sort.

What choice do we confront today? There is no longer anything like the socialism of the East. It is perhaps a sign that the honor of the name has been partially restored that no serious person would think of calling the North Korean regime "socialist." Nor does that name fit the Chinese regime, where a Leninist party rules over a capitalist country. And it certainly doesn't fit Russia, currently governed by a coalition of autocrats and robber barons. In the European West, by contrast, one might say that socialists, or social democrats, or laborite politicians have won out; indeed, they had won out even before the great recession of 2008, when center-right parties across Europe adopted

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many of their regulatory and welfarist policies. But the socialism of the West today is so modest that it can't be called either revolutionary or reformist; it has become conventional.

Let me describe this conventional socialism—which is still, despite its modesty, a significant political achievement. After that, we can ask if the question, “Which socialism?” still makes any sense. Today's socialism—social democracy is probably the more accurate name—combines three features, each of them crucial to the overall value of the combination.

(1) It is a democratic regime, with rival parties, a well-entrenched right of opposition, and a formally free press. Vanguard dictatorship is a thing of the past, even as an ideological aspiration. Executive power is limited, the legislature is in principle supreme, judges are independent. Elections are strongly contested; every citizen has the right to vote, and all votes are counted. The secret police don't come in the middle of the night to arrest oppositionists and dissidents. Though a couple of these statements should probably be qualified, there is at least some truth to all of them. They describe a regime vastly preferable to every other possibility. People forget how difficult the making of this regime was, how long the democratic struggle took, how many people risked their lives and careers in its course. Democracy seems routine—it's just the way things are—which is always a mistaken view.

(2) The market is subject to state regulation. In the wake of the credit crisis and the near collapse of the banking system, almost everybody accepts the need for some regulation. In fact, the regulatory regime is already extensive; there is hardly any aspect of market relations that isn't subject to public control or supervision. The money supply is determined by state officials; interest rates are regulated, bank deposits insured, faltering industries subsidized, the right of workers to organize formally protected. Once again, these points invite qualification, especially so in the United States; it remains true, nonetheless, that in all Western countries the macro-economy is decisively shaped by state action. And this also seems routine. Ideologues on the far Right, who want a pure market economy, and ideologues on the far Left, who long for a Five-Year Plan, are marginal in identical ways. They lead

sects, not major parties or movements.

(3) The democratic state is also a welfare state. In this country, public provision is meager and shoddy by European standards. But the standards set by Europe are the ones that American liberals and leftists aspire to reach. Across much of the Western political spectrum, it is now routinely accepted that the state must provide health care, schooling, transportation, a safe environment, security in old age, and basic protection for the victims of the market economy. And it is also accepted that this provision should be redistributive in character—it should be paid for by those citizens who can afford to pay for it, in proportion to their ability, and it should benefit those in greatest need.

Agreement on these three points doesn't mean that we are at the end of political history. We still have to argue about the strength of our democracy, about the extent of market regulation (and the internal authority structure of the enterprises that compete in the market), and about the organization and generosity of welfare provision. These are important arguments, and they require difficult political battles in which men and women of the Left should be fully engaged. But is that all there is? Is that the full extent of our politics? So the question “Which socialism?” translates into “What degree of democratic participation, market regulation, and welfare provision should we aim at?” I am not against that translation. It makes a lot of sense, and then some of us can stake out strong positions on each of these points. We can work to create a radical democracy, which might involve, say, the decentralization of government functions and the empowerment of civil society. We can insist on a pluralist market, strongly and effectively regulated, with different sorts of enterprises and a highly organized work force, so as to bring us as close as possible to full employment and (what we used to call) industrial democracy. And we can demand a welfare state that really helps people in trouble and moves us steadily toward a more egalitarian society.

*These are*, no doubt, socialist and social democratic ambitions. But what distinguishes men and women of the Left from everyone else isn't just these ambitions; it is also, and perhaps

more important, the story we tell about how they have to be realized. Remember the Old Left maxim: "The liberation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself." Unless liberation is self-liberation, it won't work; it won't make us free, on the ground, in everyday life. What is most important, then, is not the final realization of socialist goals, but the process by which they are realized. I mean to adopt here a view suggested by the great "revisionist" Eduard Bernstein. We think of socialism as a "final goal," but what we are really focused on, and what we are really committed to, is the means by which we work to reach that goal. Here is our most intimate and actual ambition. In truth, the people we would most like to be are not the citizens of some future socialist state but the activists and militants struggling to bring it about. So the question "Which socialism?" should be understood in temporal terms: socialism-in-the-making or socialism-at-the-end? We should choose socialism-in-the-making to signal our belief in what Sheri Berman, in her history of social democracy, calls "the primacy of politics."

Ours is a "participatory" socialism, and so the story we have to tell is about parties, unions, movements, associations, and nongovernmental organizations of many different sorts and about their activists and militants, who are politically engaged on the Left. But the full impact of that story requires another—about the political world that we actually inhabit. I argued that democracy, regulation, and welfare are now conventional in the West. But that also means that they are subject to a certain kind of adverse pressure, which is not so much conventional as it is "natural." In every political organization and in every state and society, there is a steady tendency toward authoritarianism and hierarchy. Robert Michels wrote about this tendency long ago, at roughly the same time as Bernstein was writing and with reference to the same historical events and political experience. I want to generalize his argument to cover a wider range of events and experiences. In the absence of countervailing forces, the powerful get more powerful, and the rich get richer, and this is what is going on everywhere, all the time. The explanation for this "natural" tendency is simple: those who already possess power and wealth also possess the means to

defend and increase their power and wealth—they control the resources, instrumentalities, and agencies that make for more and more of what they already have.

All this is true despite and in the face of democracy, regulation, and welfare. Consider the extent of contemporary inequalities, the steady aggrandizement of executive power (as in the case of the Bush administration after the September 11 attacks), the increasing independence of economic regulators from democratic control (the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization), and the drift toward clientage and dependency in all modern welfare states.

But my argument requires a more general account of this "natural" tendency—an account that brings together its various aspects. So consider now its common form, which is manifest most clearly when the Right is in power, though I could tell a modified version of the same story at other times as well. This is the story.

*Those who have* political power use it to enhance their own position and the well-being of their friends and allies, repressing or excluding groups that might provide a social base for opposition—subordinates of all kinds, workers, women, immigrants, racial and religious minorities—and accommodating or marginalizing the intelligentsia. To sustain their rule, they seek "power after power," as Hobbes wrote long ago, strengthening the executive branch, building up the army, creating secret police units, corrupting the civil service, setting limits on press freedoms. They discourage or co-opt opposition leaders or find more-or-less legal means of repression. They reward their financial supporters with franchises, licenses, immunities, monopolies, and contracts—and even more significantly with the assistance of state agencies in overcoming competition, resisting union organizers, avoiding the enforcement of safety and environmental regulations, and much more. Sometimes, they do this in the context of a declared emergency; more often, they maneuver within constitutional limits. They do it over a short period of time or, if they are smart, gradually and incrementally, so that it

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really looks like a natural tendency.

The tendency is natural in this sense—that it is at least partially impervious to constitutional mechanisms and arrangements; it can be temporarily stopped (as we hope it has been in Washington today) but not stopped entirely. Opposition to the tendency is also natural, but whereas the tendency is steady, the opposition is sporadic. We can think of the activity of anti-authoritarian and anti-hierarchical militants as “steady work,” but the work succeeds only when it produces flashes of mass militancy—mobilizations, uprisings, insurgencies. The aggrandizement of power and wealth can only be stopped or, more realistically, interrupted and partially reversed, by massive opposition. Democratic victories are possible, but they must be reiterated, because the aggrandizement of power and wealth is continuous. My argument here parallels the argument of eighteenth-century rebels, who wrote, “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” In the same way, “Repeated insurgency is the price of equality.”

I use “insurgency” to describe things like the labor movement of the 1930s, which challenged the authority of capital; the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which challenged the racial hierarchy; and the feminism of the 1970s, which challenged the gender hierarchy. Though all these movements fell far short of the ambitions of their militants, they did succeed in changing the distribution of power and wealth in the United States. They bucked the trend toward “power after power” and shifted the balance of forces in small but significant ways. And by unionizing workers and writing civil rights and gender equality into the law, they set up obstacles to the resumption of the natural tendency. I suspect that the second set of obstacles will prove (has already proved) more effective than the first. In a capitalist society, racial and gender inequalities probably aren’t necessary to the existence of a hierarchical order, but the dominance of capital over labor certainly is—hence its clear reestablishment in the last three decades. So what was true in the 1930s is true again today: the inequalities of American society won’t find a remedy short of a new insurgency. This critical truth is already manifest in the struggle of the Obama administration to strengthen the welfare state and stop the drift toward greater and greater inequality.

Without a popular movement behind them, there are severe limits on what the president and his advisers can accomplish—and the thirteen million e-mail addresses collected during Obama’s movement-like campaign do not in fact constitute a movement.

But it isn’t true, as we all know, that every insurgency serves the cause of democracy and equality. What about right-wing, populist, and anti-immigrant insurgencies, which also (sometimes) challenge overbearing governments and arrogant elites? And what about revolutions, the great world-historical insurgencies, some of which produce, at the end, tyrannical and terrorist regimes? It doesn’t make sense to celebrate every popular uprising. Socialism-in-the-making depends on militants and activists committed to socialist and social democratic values. That means committed to democracy and also to equality. And because the tendency toward authoritarianism and hierarchy is also present in the organizations of the Left (which were the subjects of Michel’s analysis), these commitments are continually tested and need to be regularly re-asserted. Periodic insurgencies are also necessary inside labor unions and socialist and social democratic parties.

Democratic and egalitarian insurgents, wherever they are, are our comrades. They are the makers of socialism-in-the-making, and their work is never done. Let me describe that work in the same general way that I described the aggrandizement of the powerful and the rich.

Political weakness and material poverty are common and long-standing conditions; men and women live under those conditions without public opposition; they complain only among themselves, in much the same way as they complain about old age or the weather. Their suffering seems inevitable; it is the way of the world. But then something happens—a military defeat, an economic collapse, an uprising somewhere else, a minor incident of bureaucratic insult or police brutality that turns into a flash-point—and people begin to talk excitedly among themselves and then to organize. The authorities always claim that “outside agitators” are responsible for the sudden unrest. And there is some truth to the claim: union organizers, recruited from the tiny Socialist and Communist parties, played a critical part in the

American labor movement of the 1930s. Northern radicals and civil rights workers rushed southward in the 1960s and helped to galvanize resistance to the segregation system. Militant New Left women, disappointed in their male counterparts, helped to drive consciousness-raising among women who weren't leftists at all. But the outside agitators wouldn't have a chance if they weren't swimming (to use an Old Left metaphor) in a sea of popular discontent.

*The most remarkable* thing about this "movement moment" isn't the work of the outsiders but of the locals—workers in the steel and auto plants, for example, or black students and Baptist church members across the South, or "ordinary" American housewives. Men and women who had been passive, disengaged, perhaps afraid of any public activity; men and women who were narrowly focused on their families, struggling to get by—these same people show up at meetings, stand up and argue, agree to serve on committees, and turn out to have talents and capacities that they never used before. Resigned to the conditions of their subordination, they looked inarticulate, even unintelligent. In the movement, speaking in front of others, organizing demonstrations, negotiating with the police, raising money, designing placards and posters, arguing about the "message" of the next leaflet, reaching out to friends who hold back, they look like highly competent men and women. The relationships that develop among them and the decision-making procedures that they work out for themselves prefigure the society we (socialists and social democrats) hope to create.

Left insurgencies have the general form that I have just described, and I think that they are different, even if not entirely different, from right-wing (and ostensibly left-wing) populist uprisings, like those led by Juan Perón in Argentina and Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and from the politicized versions of religious zealotry, as in the Iranian revolution, all of which tend to focus quickly on the Maximal or the Supreme Leader. But this difference has to be articulated, and the democratic commitments of the Left have to be defended. Mass mobilizations organized by fascist parties or reli-

gious zealots may look very much like mass mobilizations organized by socialist parties and labor unions. People in the streets, marching, shouting, shaking their fists. The poor, the dispossessed, suddenly bold, challenging long-established authority. They could be following a führer or an ayatollah; or they could be following leaders who are accountable within the internal politics of a party or union. They could be following blindly, or they could be engaged in arguments about the program of their movement. They could be mobilized only for the march, or they could be mobilized for meetings and committees after the march is over. They could be driven by hatred directed at "enemies of the people" or at heretics and infidels, or they could be driven by the hope for a more attractive place and a better time for everyone. These are critical differences, and unless we insist on them, unless we refuse to be fooled by look-alike mobilizations, there won't be any socialism-in-the-making.

There are also leftist look-alikes, the leaders of vanguard parties or sects, who claim to believe in democratic accountability, meetings and committees, equality and inclusiveness—but all this, they say, is for the golden future. What is necessary now, in the midst of crisis and struggle, is their leadership and the unquestioning obedience of everyone else. They know what is necessary, whereas the masses must be tricked or coerced into following them. As the lower classes were once taught their place in the old order, so now they must be taught their place in the new one, and the two teachings are not as different as they ought to be.

Vanguardism once distinguished the socialism of the East from the socialism of the West. Now it is largely discredited on the Left, though it has been fully adopted by religious zealots and by terrorist organizations of different sorts. It also survives in rarefied form among some academic leftists, where it is manifest in the adoption of a "discourse" that is comprehensible only to an elite of knowers. In politics, any claim to esoteric knowledge is dangerous. We should be ready to listen to knowledgeable people—and then we can argue among ourselves about what we hear. But the spectacle of masses of men and women marching but not arguing should never be confused with socialist or social democratic insurgency.

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"The task of the intelligentsia," Lenin once wrote, "is to make leaders from among the intelligentsia unnecessary." Lenin obviously thought that leaders like himself were necessary now but one day might not be. But I am focused on "now." Are leaders like Lenin necessary for socialism-in-the-making? The answer has to be "No," even though some insurgent leaders have been and will be intellectuals. Look back at my three movement examples: John L. Lewis, who led the Mine Workers and then the CIO in the thirties, wasn't an intellectual; Martin Luther King Jr., the most important civil rights leader in the sixties, certainly was; Betty Friedan, spokesperson for the Second Wave of feminism, stands somewhere in between. Other labor and feminist leaders were from the intelligentsia; other Baptist preachers were not. But what is most important is that, in any genuine left insurgency, intellectuals are not leaders because they have special knowledge—like Lenin's knowledge about the necessary direction of historical development. They are leaders, if they are leaders, because they are persuasive and energizing, because they are models of commitment and activism. "If you wish to influence other people," Marx wrote in one of my favorite passages from the *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*, then "you must be a person who really has a stimulating and encouraging effect upon others." In a democratic society, there is no other claim to influence. And that fact—*there is no other claim*—underpins democratic equality.

*I have tried* to describe the political/moral character of socialism-in-the-making. I want to turn now to its social location. Socialist, social democratic, and laborite politicians, and in this country, liberal politicians, obviously participate and should participate in governments. Sometimes they come to power as the result of an insurgency; sometimes, as in my examples, their governments make insurgency possible. So Franklin Roosevelt's election in 1932 opened the way for the labor movement, and John F. Kennedy's election in 1960 created the political space in which the civil rights movement grew—and all the rest of sixties and seventies radicalism, too. But sometimes, all that

socialists-in-office or liberals-in-office are able to do is to hold back the "natural" aggrandizement of power and wealth (and sometimes they don't even do that).

The true home of socialism-in-the-making isn't the government; it is the political space that exists outside the government, which is only in the best of times protected and expanded by friendly office holders. Mostly, militants and activists have to create it, and defend it, on their own. The space is always contested, and the locus of the contests is civil society.

Civil society is, like the state itself, a realm of inequality, where the powerful get more powerful and the rich get richer. Every civil association, every organized group of men and women, is also a mobilization of resources: the more resources its members bring with them, the stronger the group. The stronger the group, the more it is able to enhance the impact of the resources it collects. The greater its impact, the better its members fare. This is an obvious story, but it isn't the whole story. Civil society is simultaneously a realm of opportunity for democratic and egalitarian activists—because numbers are also a resource, which can be given organizational form and then developed and enhanced. And numbers are, obviously, the resource of the many. I want to celebrate the organizations that work to make that resource effective. Some of these are small organizations, but they are open to expansion when the time is right.

More than half a century ago, the British social theorist A.D. Lindsay described the "dissenting" Protestant congregations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain as schools for democracy. They were that, but they had intrinsic as well as instrumental value—and this is true today of all the associations of civil society that engage the energy and idealism of their members. It is probably true for the greater number of these members that their most satisfying activities, where they are most likely to work closely with other people, achieve something of value, and recognize themselves in the achievement, take place in their unions, movements, parties, churches, and mutual aid organizations—in civil society, that is, and not in the state. Of course, only some of these members are socialists and social-

democrats (liberals in the United States), but virtually all socialists and social democrats are members, for left politics requires mutuality and cooperation.

It also requires political struggle. I suppose all the associations in civil society are competitive with one another—for attention, for members, for money. Conflict is pervasive in civil society. But socialist and social democratic (and liberal) associations are engaged in a highly particular kind of conflict. They are oppositionist in character, even when their friends are in the government, and what they oppose, what they fight against, is the aggrandizement of power and wealth.

Anarchists and communists talk, or used to talk, of doing away with power and wealth—literally: so that no one would ever exercise power over anyone else and no one would be able, after the abolition of market exchange, to “make” more money than anyone else. Socialists and social-democrats, by contrast, believe in the uses of power, so long as it is democratically delegated and limited; and they have come to believe in the market’s capacity to coordinate economic activity, so long as it is subject to democratic control. Some might say that these beliefs represent compromises with the devil, but I don’t think so. They are compromises with the desires of most human beings—with men and women who want more influence in their community, or who want to be recognized as leaders in their party or union or church, or who want a nicer home or a longer vacation or a more comfortable life for their families. In the past, the Left has often adopted a kind of asceticism with regard to goods like these—an asceticism remarkably like that of puritanical religions. And ascetics in power, whether secular or religious, regularly produce a grossly coercive politics. The compromises we have made are good compromises—morally necessary, too—and they make it more likely that we will be joined, when the time is right, by large numbers of our fellows. They also make it possible for us to participate usefully in insurgencies, like the labor, civil rights, and feminist movements, that are not totalizing and apocalyptic, that achieve something but not everything.

It is better to accommodate human desires, even though we are then required by our egalitarian commitments to fight against men and women who desire more than they ought to

have. If there are civil associations, there will be people wanting too much control of their activities; if there is a state, there will be politicians aiming at tyrannical power; if there is a market, there will be monopoly seekers, inside traders, fraudulent financiers, robber barons, sweat-shop owners, and unscrupulous CEOs. And all these people will join together in something like (what we used to call) a ruling class. The aim of our associations and activists is to set limits on what that class can do—and to prepare the way for the insurgencies that disrupt its entrenchment.

Every insurgency is a small advance toward the society of our dreams. Sometimes the small advances accumulate, as in the history of social democracy: two steps forward, one step back. Sometimes, as we all know, what happens is more like one step forward, two steps back. Things get better for some people in some places; persecuted, exploited, and oppressed groups learn to protect themselves and actually win effective protection. Some of these victories are permanent; some are not. We have to defend democracy, regulation, and welfare against constant erosion and adversarial capture; sometimes we do that well, sometimes not. The work is steady, the benefits come mostly in spurts. But the goodness is in the work as much as in the benefits—so it doesn’t matter if the work goes on and on, as it does. It is important and worthwhile work because of its mutuality, because of the talents and capacities it calls forth, and because of the moral value it embodies. That work is socialism-in-the-making, and that is the only socialism we will ever know.

No theory of the end of history fits our political experience. The idea of historical determinism, like the idea of divine predestination, is lost on us. We have no certainty about the future. Instead, we have learned the wisdom of Kafka’s comment on the biblical story of the death of Moses: “Not because his life was too short does Moses not reach [the promised land], but because it was a human life.”

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**Michael Walzer** is *Dissent*’s co-editor. He and Nicolaus Mills edited the *Dissent*/Penn Press book *Getting Out: Historical Perspectives on Leaving Iraq*. This article is adapted from a speech delivered in Turin, Italy, in 2009 to mark the centenary of the birth of Norberto Bobbio.

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