

Transition: End of the Debate

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ABSTRACT

While the terms *socialism* and *communism* have often been used interchangeably, Marx offers multiple formulations that clarify their relation. His schematic account sets them as distinct but linked moments on a historical trajectory, with the lower stage of socialism retaining primary bourgeois suppositions but opening onto the higher stage of communism. This model of transition oriented revolutionary thought in the Marxist tradition for at least a century, from 1875 onward. In the present, however, the link between the two stages appears broken, not by ideological differences but for material reasons. These material reasons have to do with changes in class composition at a global level that are driven by capital's declining capacity to absorb labor into the productive process, which undermines the anticapitalist capacities of a working class once thought able to seize the means of production. Consequently the debate no longer concerns the nature of the transition but how to proceed in its absence. This abandonment of transition as a revolutionary axiom is presented both by socialists and communists. The social forms of socialism and communism no longer appear as continuous but as opposed.

There is a certain kind of book, a genre let's say, of which Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013) provides an exemplary case. The book demonstrates at great length that the social arrangement called capitalism produces growing wealth disparity and does so inexorably. We discover that the motion witnessed by all—wherein the proletariat is increasingly dispossessed, lives broken before the engine of capital—is not simply a historical but a logical certainty, a constitutive feature of capitalism. Misery must broaden and deepen; no other outcome is possible as long as capitalism obtains.

Despite its title, the book is at pains to speak to those beyond a Marxist readership. Its famous formula ($r > g$) refers to the relation between returns on capital and economic growth, eschewing the categories of surplus value and accumulation which Marx develops from his critique of political economy. Piketty's description of economics has the imprimatur that comes from adhering to its discipline's bourgeois norms, resisting the peripheralization that comes with heterodox approaches. Moreover, it is precisely Piketty's mathematization, the trappings of orthodox economics and objective truth, that affords an experience of "proof."

This renders entirely surreal the gap or *decalage* or *clinamen* between the book's *what is* and its *what is to be done*. Having completed its grim presentation, the book rounds toward remedy. Confronted with such a brutal exegesis of developments in the realm of necessity, what does the realm of freedom look like for such a book? It turns out that it looks like an unambitious welfare state and some progressive taxation. In short, more capitalism. This despite the fact that capitalism necessarily—oh nevermind.

Rarely has so much bang inspired so much whimper. But in truth there is no shortage of books that follow this recipe, even from those to the left of the erstwhile Piketty (whose parents had before his birth departed their Trotskyist group, and who maintains an adjacency to the PCF in its desuetude via his engagement with *A Gauche en Europe*, which was founded by Dominique Strauss-Kahn). Naomi Klein proffers her own version of this book in both *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), and especially *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (2014), which refines the genre for the treatment of ecological crisis. Again the book proffers an exhaustive case, stated plainly in the title: capitalism as such is the absolute antagonist of the climate and of biotic survival. And this changes ... some things. The prescriptions are typified in the proposal for the Navajo to own the energy to be created by developing passive solar on the reservations, such that they might sell it for profit as part of a slow transition from coal. The logic of market-based solutions prevails.

Or consider David Harvey, one of the signal Marxist thinkers of our era, and one of the most prolific. He has taken to writing a version of this book repeatedly. Against the ceaseless and violently compelled upward transfer of wealth via power and plunder that he identifies with the title subject in his 2005 book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (to choose but one example), his conclusion suggests rather demure responses at the level of institutional reform. Again, the elision is perplexing.

The lonely hour of the last chapter always arrives. Books must have conclusions, to be sure. The temptation to end with prescription rather than empirical catastrophe is strong. It need not be *this* milquetoast prescription, however, so analytically unrelated to what has led us there. And it would be hard to attribute this flinching conclusion to the publisher's desire for a happy ending; Harvey surely has the credibility and wherewithal to say whatever the hell he wants—and not only him. One may be tempted therefore to understand this jumping the rails as something like a deathbed conversion, a compromise of revolutionary will when confronted with the aspect of eternity. It is not so much that one becomes a true believer in the gospel of reascent New Dealism but that there is a quite explicable desire to see *something* happen before one dies, some bettering of the general misery which surrounds us. Who could resent someone such a desire? Still, what to make of this curious book, written by avowed critics of capitalism across the disciplines—a genre which I sometimes call Eleven Chapters of Marx, One Chapter of Keynes (or, alternately, Eleven Chapters of Communism, One Chapter of Social Democracy)?

The answer is surely not to complain of hypocrisy, nor of some failure to muster the courage to make a grander if less purportedly practical demand. Rather we might take this strange genre, this formalized if seemingly unreflective delinking of the present from the future, as an index of some other blockage. It would be easy to defer to “1989.” It has become a sort of commonplace to blame the failure of revolutionary imagination on the collapse of the Soviet empire, and the collapse of the Soviet socialist project well before that. And I suspect there is some truth to this connection. Not, however, in some generalized and dissipated way wherein the existence of the USSR functions as metonym in the western imagi-

nary for communist revolution in the twentieth century—and in turn the fate of Russia stands for the impossibility of any and all such revolutions (or, in a different version, their undesirability). That surely is too vague an account.

The disaster of the USSR, anything but obscure, is not that the communist project failed, but that it failed to become a communist project. It arrived, arguably (I suppose as everything is an argument) at the lower stage—or at least a version of it. But, for endlessly parsable reasons, none of which alter the actuality of the outcome, it stalled at the moment of provisional socialism. This is the moment “between capitalist and communist society,” as Marx writes in *Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875), wherein we find “the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*” (18; original emphasis).

These words will be well known to readers. Nonetheless, the naming conventions which relate socialism to communism have changed and changed again. They have, among other things, regularly featured a confusion between the two, or their seeming interchangeability, both early in this history and late. This confusion in the present can mostly be understood as a consequence of an anticommunism immanent to reactionaries, conservatives, and for that matter liberals in the postwar period—joined together by, if nothing else, their readiness to declare the mildest social democrat to be a communist. That “alt-right” adherents in 2017 casually identify mainstream liberals as “communists” is no more a registration of our moment’s political decadence than it is an inevitable endpoint of the Red Scares that never quite went away, entering around 1989 into a sort of latency that would prove temporary.

But this is not the only basis for some degree of confusion regarding the relationship of socialism and communism. There is as well the famous declaration from *The German Ideology* (1845) which would seem to rest uneasily alongside the lower/higher stage model, insisting that “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things” (57; original emphases). Here it would seem that a state of affairs, socialism, might be counterposed to a process, communism.

But the formulations from these two sources, three decades apart, are not finally so incommensurate. Socialism, we are given to understand in both cases, remains within “the present state of things”—it retains in essence the same mode of production and with it a form of the bourgeois state, albeit ruled over by a different social fraction and offering a greatly changed mode of distribution. This is how Moishe Postone identifies “traditional Marxism [which] replaces Marx’s critique of the mode of production and distribution with a critique of the mode of distribution alone.” Here, mode of production is clearly assigned to the *form* of labor that is understood as “the transhistorical source of wealth and the basis of social constitution” (69). As he continues, “the abstract domination and the exploitation of labor characteristic of capitalism are grounded, ultimately, not in the appropriation of surplus by the nonlaboring classes, but in the form of labor in capitalism” (161).

And yet, as Postone suggests, Marx himself was not a traditional Marxist. As he notes in 1875, socialism, a moment within an uncompleted transition, will require the apparatus of the state still rooted in bourgeois form.

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and with it also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished, after labor has become not only a livelihood but life's prime want, after the productive forces have increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois law be left behind in its entirety. (*Critique of the Gotha Program* 10)

Communism lies in “the future, in which its present root, bourgeois society, will have died off” (18). This refusal to describe a particular state of affairs for communism is in keeping with 1845's commitment to communism-as-process, which can open only onto speculation: “The question then arises: What transformation will the state undergo in communist society? In other words, what social functions will remain in existence there that are analogous to present state functions?” (18).

The relation between socialism and communism can thus be clarified as a relation of transition itself, defined both by continuity and rupture. One leads to the other; they are not of a kind. We can imagine one by reference to bourgeois forms, but not the other. Said forms wane until they are something else entirely, until we find ourselves in an entirely other mode of production. Behind the dialectic of continuity and rupture we find the *ur*-example of a dialectical shift from quantity to quality.

So then: a complicated history of the relation between socialism and communism (of which this brief introduction merely scratches the surface). Still, we might proceed with a firm grounding. The theorist and autoworker James Boggs provides, in 1963, a splendid *précis* of this relation and its historical unfolding.

Thus the question, ‘What is socialism?’ finds the American Marxists constantly seeking a new formula to fit in with the ever-changing conditions of the country. So that today when one asks an American Marxist point-blank, ‘What is socialism and why should the people struggle for it?’ he is baffled and has to fumble around for an answer.

Marx in the 19th century said that there would have to be a transitional society between the class society of capitalism and the classless society of communism. This transitional society, which he called socialism, would still be a class society but instead of the capitalists being the ruling class, the workers would rule. It was this rule by the workers which, for Marx, would make the society socialist. As the ruling class, the workers would then develop the productive forces to the stage where there could be all-around development of each individual and the principle of ‘from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs’ could be realized. At this point there could be the classless society or communism. (43)

The clarity of this summary of the tradition, and the question of whether we might still find it persuasive, provides the basis for a debate about the current status of the transition in question. This is the pressing theoretical and practical issue for communists today. In short, can we still imagine that this sequence of lower and higher stages retains its continuity? Is the path still open; are socialism and communism still linked?

The reader will have already guessed this essay's earnest proposal: that the curious textual genre with which we began, with its baffling break between description and prescription, with its delinking of current crisis from a communist future even as it establishes that no other course is adequate for human emancipation (and civilizational survival), is not an error but a symptom of the broken link which once joined socialism and communism in a historical trajectory. Communism is necessary but impossible; this is the underlying logic of the genre.

The great impasse (I wish to say "left impasse," but for reasons that will become clear, I am uncertain that the left-right spectrum, now more than two centuries old, preserves its efficacy) lies in the possibility that not only is the link between socialism and communism broken but also that the two politics are now set in opposition. That is, to be sure, a dramatic reading of the transition debate. Herein the hope is only to set forth the basis for such a reading in historical materialist terms—which is to say, based in restructurings of capital rather than in moral judgments about what is desirable, or in pseudoempirical rejections of historical strategies derived sheerly from the fact of failure to this point. All anti-capitalist politics start from failure to this point; that dour note alone tells us little about the affordances of the present, and how they may differ from those of 1917 or 1947 or 1959, Russia or China or Cuba, to name just three red stars on the map of the twentieth century.

In the realms of academic Marxism, "the transition debate" generally refers to a set of arguments and discussions around the transition *to* capitalism: how it happened, and why, and (with gathering significance) where. The stakes of the lattermost item in particular are inseparable from the question of whether the vision of a totalizing capitalism which moves to ensnare every corner of the globe is a representation of the *actuality* of capitalism's trajectory from the textile mills of Europe to the rest of the world, or is rather an ideologically Eurocentric and totalizing *episteme* that misrecognizes what is more accurately termed a heterogeneous set of interlinked and non-synchronous phenomena lacking a unitary source, and unthinkable without giving priority to local and regional particularities. While entering into this debate is beyond the scope of the present essay, I want to suggest that the two transitions are inseparable. This is true in at least two senses. One concerns the character of the debate regarding the transition to capitalism: a debate which is, among other things, racialized, opposing a capitalism oriented by the originary figure of the white European industrial worker with the proposition of a multipolar emergence. The other is not as much integral to the debate as to the course of global capital, understood according to the idea of "combined and uneven development": the account wherein systematic increase of productive powers both preserves developmental differentials at local and global levels and raises the overall level of productivity across the world-system. This double action is clear both in the name and in Trotsky's original account:

The law of combined development reveals itself most indubitably, however, in the history and character of Russian industry. Arising late, Russian industry did not repeat the development of the advanced countries, but inserted itself into this development, adapting their latest achievements to its own backwardness. Just as the economic evolution of Russia as a whole skipped over the epoch of craft-guilds and manufacture, so also the

separate branches of industry made a series of special leaps over technical productive stages that had been measured in the West by decades. (7)

Thus, even as global capital develops unevenly, with massive differences among high, medium, and low-wage nations, the capacity to internalize new labor inputs decreases over time. This is perhaps the pivotal transformation, at the level of capital as a whole, for understanding the transition debate in the present. The great expansions of access to a relatively regular wage which accompanied industrialization are not to be repeated. “Automation replaces men,” as Boggs notes.

This of course is nothing new. What is new is that now, unlike most earlier periods, the displaced men have nowhere to go. The farmers displaced by mechanization of the farms in the 20’s could go to the cities and man the assembly lines. As for the work animals like the mule, they could just stop growing them. But automation displaces people, and you don’t just stop growing people even when they have been made expendable by the system. (36)

Shortly he arrives at his most pithy and most prescient maxim: “America is headed toward full unemployment, not full employment” (58). And it is decisively not the case that this motion is countered elsewhere. Even those nations with the largest industrial workforces have nothing like the percentages of industrial labor that 50 years ago characterized developed nations overall, much less Germany, Japan, and the UK. While the tertiary or service sector has grown in parallel, it has not kept pace. A consequence of this is the substantial increase of informal workers globally, lacking immediate access to the wage and forming an ever-growing stagnant surplus population.

What then is the significance of this for the transition debate? For a certain kind of Marxist, actual or imagined, very little indeed. The adherence to revolutionary conceptions modeled after the class-mass party sequence retains a certain currency, taking in main two distinct forms, each with its own subforms. One is the commitment to an enduring labor metaphysic. This may involve a sense that, against theoretical flummery, union organizing still gets the goods—at least some of them—and helps immiserated people (it is this labor left position that is not necessarily Marxist, though often presumed to be, and often concerned with inequality while lacking much of an account of exploitation). It may involve a more conceptual insistence that the position of labor still provides the only potential universalism which can unite a mass movement adequate to revolutionary struggle against capital, while particularisms lack this capacity and moreover may be compatible with capitalist exploitation. It may further insist that only the working class has access to the levers of the economy, and that “point of production” struggles thus retain their strategic primacy. For these intertwined positions, the political-economic structure may have shifted but the mode of production remains fundamentally the same, thereby providing no substantive reason why an entire political program should be invalidated. It is to these arguments that the rest of the essay turns.

First, however, we might pause over the other variety of 1917-ism familiar to the present: the persistent faith in the party form, and renewed calls for a vanguard party in particular as necessary focalizer of revolutionary agitation. This

we might understand as a faith in the autonomy of the political so extreme as to depart the terrain of historical materialism, which presupposes not any particular political form but rather a set of determinations and a shifting set of historical affordances. Animated by the vision of a sovereignty which provides an autonomy from not just “neoliberalism” and its demands but from the very “laws of motion” central to Marx’s relation of modern history and the logic of capital, these conceptions are arguably communist but only in the most idealist sense. It is worth noting that vanguardists of this sort are generally willing to work within limited frameworks of socialist parliamentarism; they keep faith with the narrative of transition if nothing else. This leaves them as interesting exceptions regarding current transition debates, an exception deserving of its own study but of limited relevance to the present consideration.

Let us then offer the other side of the balance sheet in the transition debate. In the first instance, crude but substantive, the possibilities for seizure of the means of production lessen as the presence of living labor departs the industrial, agricultural, and extractive sectors. We focus on these sectors not out of some fealty to the nineteenth century but for practical reasons. While the growing service sector remains relatively labor-intensive and notoriously difficult to automate, it is not at all clear what it would mean to seize these lowlands. Legal aids, helpline operators, home health care workers, delivery drivers, and program debuggers would have differing contributions to offer a socialist economy, but none of them produce the means of subsistence which are the basis of social reproduction.

Thus we must look to the regions of the economy that produce not just surplus value but immediate uses. The situation is dire. The waning of the modern labor movement in the overdeveloped world marks it out with devastating clarity. Its failure (visible for example in the effective disappearance of large-scale, sustained strikes since the eighties) is often enough explained according to a failure of will on the part of union leadership, or the systematic attacks on labor by capital with the state as its executor. Such a gloss cannot deserve the name of historical materialism. We must ask under what conditions attacks on organized labor are able to achieve such success, while labor’s pacifism comes to seem politically desirable.

Here it is the matter of unemployment, of a slack labor market, that plays the decisive role. Labor shared to some extent in capital’s advances during the long boom (generally dated in the United States to 1947-1973) because profitability in these sectors was high, capital flowed to drive growth along with productivity, and the labor market was in turn relatively taut. When these conditions ebbed, starting in the sixties and accelerating dramatically through the crises of 1973 and 1979, labor’s share of profits and power ebbed as well—not because productivity gains ceased but because they continued apace while growth slowed. This led irrevocably to the shedding of workers. Wages ceased to follow productivity upward; fiscal policies abandoned “full employment” (already set at some distance from actual full employment) as a parameter; recessions followed by jobless recoveries became the norm. These are the conditions of the labor movement’s decrepitude.

This trajectory has been described in various ways. Perhaps the most suggestive is that account developed by *Théorie Communiste* in various writings from the seventies onward. Using a periodizing scheme based on progressing eras of

subsumption, from formal to real to a “second real subsumption” (a schema in keeping with Jacques Camatte and later Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri), they identify the sixties and seventies as the end of the historical workers’ movement that began a century earlier. The logic of this periodizing scheme has been disputed persuasively; the ambiguity of a “second real subsumption” and its relation to value production presents an irresolvable puzzle. Helpfully, *Théorie Communiste* attends more carefully to the capital-labor relation as it develops according to the law of value as expressed through intercapitalist competition as well as a variegated and competitive labor market.

As capital shifts increasingly toward the extraction of relative surplus value, labor works less and less for itself and more for capital; workers’ capacity to affirm their being *against* capital declines. At the same time, capital’s margins diminish. From this point on, union struggles appear as at best defensive: negotiations are ever more likely to concern the intensity of wage cuts, the amount of layoffs, the degree of sweating. In this period, the relation between capital and labor is “*immediately* internal,” in the terms of the Endnotes collective (“History of Subsumption” 147; original emphasis): class reproduction no longer sets as its prerequisite an antagonism with capital. Rather, a faltering capital must be affirmed by labor as the source of social reproduction.

Periodization aside, the provided description of labor movement activities holds true. In Detroit in 1973, “for the first time in the history of the UAW [United Auto Workers], the union mobilized to keep a plant open,” as news anchor Bill Bonds put it, speaking of events at the Mack stamping plant in August 1973 (qtd. Georgakas and Surkin 189). This would set the agenda going forward. In plain language, the unions are compelled to organize to keep firms in business. The relation becomes at heart collaborative rather than contradictory; the vision of a working class en route to becoming a class for itself fades away.

This proposes a rift between those who still have access to the wage and those who do not—between the empirical working class and the remainder of the proletariat understood in its full sense of those without reserves, which includes the gathering mass of those now permanently surplus to the needs of capital and to the production of surplus value (for these are one and the same). It is a rift that is among other things profoundly racialized and gendered, as expulsion from production is organized consistently by race and ethnicity locally, and by the strange elision of race and nation in the global division of labor. Entangled with this is the uncounted sphere of reproductive labor, which everywhere retains its gendered character, as explored by figures such as Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, and others.

Confronting the rising opposition between those included and excluded from the formal labor market, Boggs again will prove an early narrator of the tale.

In December, 1958, the unemployed began to picket both the plant and the union against overtime. When this happened, the union, in cooperation with the company and the courts, saw to it that a ruling was handed down that any picketing by the unemployed of a plant is in violation of the contract. Not satisfied with this outlawing of actions by its unemployed members, the union at its next convention decided that unemployed workers could only retain their membership and the right to vote if they reported to the local

union during the last ten days of each month. Thus the union has itself drawn the line between the employed and the unemployed. (25)

One can see the parts of the argument snapping together. If organized labor is increasingly compelled to defend the solvency of capital, and in so doing must set itself against the unemployed (more accurately the informalized), and if the portion of the population exiled to the informal sector continues to grow, then the possibilities of a coherent working class project for the seizure of power cannot help but melt and resolve themselves into a dew. The darkest of conclusions, then, from the communist perspective, might be that the sort of program for transition meant to proceed from quantity to kind, socialism to communism, is itself no longer possible.

This does not rule out the possibility of a communist society. It simply argues against a particular vision of how one might arrive at such a destination; no longer do socialism and communism appear as successive and interlinked “stages.” This discontinuity is the basis for what is often called “communization”: not a theory but a sense of how revolution might unfold in the absence of potential for transition. It does not imagine (much less demand) an immediate and instantaneous shift in the mode of production; rather it expects the imposition of communist measures in given situations of social collapse, knowing that people will struggle to preserve and spread such measures, successfully or not.

One might think that socialists, skeptical of such a seemingly immediate transformation, would insist all the more on the need for a transitional program; there was a moment when this was the case. What is remarkable about the present moment, however, is the extent to which a break with the vision of transition is also to be found among those retaining a commitment to socialism. Indeed, the current generation of western socialists has reached much the same conclusion regarding the closure of transition, albeit from a different standpoint.

This may go some good distance toward explaining the remarkably unambitious formulations of socialism currently on offer. We have seen, across the west, a series of recent travesties under that banner: the imposition by French socialists of labor discipline more ambitious than anything achieved by Sarkozy's *Union pour un mouvement populaire*; the prostration in Greece of SYRIZA before the banks of Europe, against the will of its own constituents; and so on. Nonetheless, we must take seriously the rising fortunes of Jeremy Corbyn's left Labour movement in the United Kingdom and the blooming rose of the Democratic Socialists of America.

There can be little doubt that these developments express a real change in the world. They less plausibly denote a leftward shift of the political field than the dissolution of the center and thus the conditions for greater oscillations and greater volatility. The great catchment of historical liberalism is less catchy these days. The conventions of “right” and “left” possess decreasing explanatory power: consider for example their curious non-relation to the debates about national autonomy throughout the planetary network of states and markets, with the Brexit vote being only the most evident example. The political orientations brought into being with the rise of the bourgeoisie, core features of capital's mode of management, fade substantively as capitalism moves through its own period of prolonged volatility and drift.

So then we have a paradox. Socialism's hand, in the United States, seems greatly strengthened in the face of a stumbling economy less able than ever to provide any promise of the good life, or even the decent life. And yet the socialist politics on offer are markedly weak, seeming to lose ambition in parallel with capital itself. To put matters as directly as possible, the democratic socialism gaining force in the United States may believe in the possibility of socialism, but as with the view of the situation from the communist perspective, it no longer believes in the transition.

The case is made most clearly by Bhaskar Sunkara who, as editor of leading movement voice *Jacobin*, is perforce a leading intellectual of the DSA. In an essay for the *The New York Times*—which commissioned a series of essays on “communism” for the centennial of the Russian Revolution, so orderly is history—Sunkara sets forth not a vision of communism but rather of socialism. In so doing, he sets it in direct opposition to historical communism. “Most socialists have been chastened by the lessons of 20th-century Communism,” he begins. “Today, many who would have cheered on the October Revolution have less confidence about the prospects for radically transforming the world in a single generation. They put an emphasis instead on political pluralism, dissent and diversity.” From this opening, he moves to define socialism more broadly.

Stripped down to its essence, and returned to its roots, socialism is an ideology of radical democracy. In an era when liberties are under attack, it seeks to empower civil society to allow participation in the decisions that affect our lives. A huge state bureaucracy, of course, can be just as alienating and undemocratic as corporate boardrooms, so we need to think hard about the new forms that social ownership could take.

Some broad outlines should already be clear: Worker-owned cooperatives, still competing in a regulated market; government services coordinated with the aid of citizen planning; and the provision of the basics necessary to live a good life (education, housing and health care) guaranteed as social rights. In other words, a world where people have the freedom to reach their potentials, whatever the circumstances of their birth. (Sunkara)

The positive claims for contemporary socialism, we must admit, are disheartening: it is still a market society; still features competition and its compulsions (which will necessarily include requisite increases in productivity, in automation, and all that follows); and still a conventional state, albeit more “democratic” (a demand as common as it is vague). Equality of opportunity—which you may recall as the fundamental individualist promise on offer from capitalism.

Certain things go unsaid. The essay does not address the fact that the viability of U.S. firms, under present conditions *and* under those imagined for social democracy, continues to require immiseration abroad. Just as notably, we must inquire: in a market socialism where firms compete for survival, how will the social wage (“the basics necessary to live a good life”) be funded? As it can only come from profits, we gather that exploitation will continue, perhaps with democratically selected bosses now charged with assuring its survival. Moreover, we will recognize that the historical capacity for a bourgeois state to fund a social wage rests on relatively high rates of profit. A return to the Keynesian compromise, which is *in nuce* what is herein requested, would require a return to growth. Social democracy has survived relatively well during booms, far less so during periods of

minimal or nonexistent economic vitality. Why, precisely, would this social plan, which preserves all the features that condition profitability in the present, reverse the course of economic decline?

It would not, of course. But that is not the underlying goal here. The weakness of this vision makes sense not despite but *because* it corresponds to the weakness of capitalism. This must be the case since the vision of eventually departing capitalism seems to have been discarded. The repeated disavowals of twentieth-century communism are on the one hand reasonable enough; we can perhaps all agree that the outcomes of the USSR or the PRC are not to be pursued. We might hesitate at the idea that these constituted communism rather than their own socialisms. But we need not hesitate over Sunkara's statements: they mean to signal not simply a knowing-better about previous failures but a valorization of socialism *contra* communism. There is neither a promise nor a hint of transition, nor of communism's desirability, nor of socialism's limits. This is no less apparent if one examines the various proposals for confronting ecological catastrophe forwarded by *Jacobin*. John Bellamy Foster suggests there is little intimation of transforming social relations.

What we get instead is a mechanistic, techno-utopian "solution" to the climate problem that ignores the social relations of science and technology, along with human needs and the wider environment. [...] [T]his vision of a state-directed, technocratic, redistributive market economy, reinforced by planetary geoengineering, does not fundamentally challenge the commodity system. [...] The issue's contributors instead endorse a "Good Anthropocene," or a renewed conquest of nature, as a means of perpetuating the basic contours of present-day commodity society, including, most disastrously, its imperative for unlimited exponential growth. Socialism, conceived in these terms, becomes nearly indistinguishable from capitalism—not a movement to replace generalized commodity society, but homologous with the fundamental structure of capitalist modernity.

In its vision of what constitutes socialism, and particularly whether it is conceived as opening onto anything beyond itself, this description comports closely with Sunkara's account. Unwilling to imagine a break from the basics of the present dispensation and cognizant of its waning ability to provide for its populace, this democratic socialism means to be in essence a method of management for steady-state capitalism, mitigating its depredations as best as possible. Market and competition-based productivism organized by a strong state will carry us as far as we are going to go. It is a sort of socialist end-of-history thesis.

So then: the conceptualization of anticapitalist revolution born in the nineteenth century and animating the twentieth is abandoned from both sides. The link has been broken not for ideological or ethical reasons (how one feels about the state, party, union bureaucracy, or the like) but according to concrete developments which shift the terrain of opposition from boss and worker to those included and those excluded from a diminishing pool of social surplus. Socialism and communism now appear as distinct routes: the former seemingly more within reach, if offering only the mildest gains for only a fraction of the globe's population; the latter felt by many to be beyond our grasp, if containing within it the possibility of human emancipation and civilizational survival. Faced with this opposition, one can well understand the strange delinking of description and prescription that characterizes the genre of book with which we began.

And yet the final argument is that the communist course, less plausible according to bourgeois common sense, is far more plausible *as a way out of capitalism*. One might feel this simply because socialism has for the most part sacrificed that as a political horizon. More crucial are the materialist problematics constellating around the retreat of the wage at a global level, and the waning capacity for wage-commodity society to provide for human flourishing; these cannot be resolved by any sort of employment program imaginable within the logic of markets and competition.

In any regard, the transition debate has changed its character dramatically within a generation in ways that are likely to have practical consequences for political organizing at multiple levels, and that ask us once again to clarify in ways more than philological the relation and distinction between socialism and communism, and their changed relation or non-relation.

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