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Transitional and Utopian Market Socialism

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The rethinking embodied in Roemer's *A Future for Socialism?*[1] represents a healthy response to the current crisis of socialist politics. Even those who are less moved than Roemer by the collapse of what were once called 'actually existing socialisms' must be concerned by the apparent success of the Thatcher/Kohl/Reagan generation of politicians in driving not only socialist theory and practice, but even fondly remembered left-wing rhetoric, off the map of everyday politics. In the face of these phenomena socialists need more than a critique of the self-evident (and even the oblique) evils of capitalist society: they need to pose an institutionally viable alternative to capitalism which can plausibly be thought to avoid at least most of the evils of the no-longer actually existing socialist societies. The return to utopian and transitional model building, as long as it does not signal a thoroughgoing retreat into theory, is a valuable component in the revivification of the socialist project.

1 Liberal and Socialist Values

Roemer suggests that we should elaborate a defensible socialist political morality and then measure institutional proposals by both their feasibility and their tendency to promote the values embodied in that political morality. Socialist political morality is identified with some set of principles of equality: Roemer's own preferred equalanda are opportunities for welfare and self-realization, political influence and social status. He says nothing about their relative importance, because different strands of the socialist tradition have weighted these values differently, and will continue to do so (although I shall raise an objection to this omission later). It might seem ungenerous to object to this first part of his paper, and not just for this reason. There are other

values, such as community and autonomy, which have been integral to some aspects of the socialist moral tradition, which Roemer may appear to neglect. But I take it that the notions of self-realization and social status, though they are both left undefined, are, between them, sufficiently flexible to accommodate concern with the apparently missing values. If one believes that valuable socialist lives will be autonomously led, or have to be shaped by as-yet-unexperienced community values in order to be fulfilling, then this will inform institutional design via either the requirement to increase equality of opportunity for self-realization or the requirement to diminish inequalities of opportunity for social status.

Having said that, these two notions of community and autonomy, at least insofar as they are distinct from equality of opportunity for political influence and of opportunity for welfare, are precisely those that have been neglected by the liberal egalitarianism from which Roemer takes his cue. If socialists fill out the notions of social status and self-realization in the perfectionist ways that would accommodate the apparently missing values, they depart to that extent from the contemporary framework within which liberal egalitarianism has been developed. The liberal egalitarian intellectual current from which Roemer takes his lead has tended to be committed to a principle of neutrality which says that the values which inform the design of state institutions should comment as little as is feasible on the content of the values by which people lead their lives. A stark economic egalitarianism passes a neutrality test, because it says nothing about how people should live their lives, commenting instead only on the relative resources that should be available to them in the pursuit of whatever goals and ideals they choose. But both socialist community or solidarity and the vision of self-realization Marx appears to endorse in the famous passage celebrating hunting, fishing, shepherding and critical criticism in the German Ideology,[2] fail the neutrality test: they comment on what a valuable life would be like and allow social institutions to be designed to encourage life of that kind or those kinds to be led. Insofar as they do that they violate liberal neutrality.[3]

Of course, this is not to say that there could not be a liberal socialism which mentioned these kinds of value. But the role assigned to perfectionist values would be different from that assigned to the neutral values. A liberal socialism could describe principles of socialist community and could predict that these values would be much more likely to be realized if institutions were designed in accordance with the neutral egalitarian principles. In other words, our neutral values should inform institutions, but in doing so our non-neutral values will

be promoted, though the promotion of the non-neutral values is not the motivation for the use of the neutral values. Furthermore, in an egalitarian and liberal civil society, socialists could promote their non-neutral values (for example, through propaganda and the formation of voluntary associations) without any violation of neutrality (which is a directive about what values may undergird the design of involuntary institutions). Roemer's liberal socialism appears to have this structure but, if it does, either the ideas of self-realization and social status should not be expanded to accommodate other socialist values, or they should not be used to inform or to evaluate his institutional proposal.

The expansiveness of the notion of self-realization, combined with the fact that Roemer does not mandate a particular weighting of the different egalitarian principles, makes this work palatable to a wider range of socialists than it might otherwise. But it also makes it very hard to apply the method of evaluation which he proposes even in the speculative way that is available to us. If we object that his proposal pays insufficient attention to equality of self-realization, for example, he can reply that this is because the proper weighting of principles places less emphasis on that principle. Nevertheless, it is fairly clear that, of the principles described in the initial section, it is equality of opportunity for welfare which the proposal is likely to advance the most, by drastically reducing inequality of resources (which are major sources of opportunity for welfare) without restricting in any important ways juridical equality of opportunity. Equal opportunity for political influence is much less well advanced by the proposal. Roemer does not, for example, mandate any institutional changes in the structure of government or electoral systems, or discuss rules governing the access of political parties to the mass media. There is no discussion of proportional representation, the rights of minorities, or campaign finance reform to insulate political processes from residual background inequalities of income and wealth, and he specifically rejects the introduction of workers' control of the workplace, a demand which has played a major role in distinguishing recent socialist politics from liberalism and moderate social democracy.

This is not to say that the proposal does nothing to advance equality of opportunity for political influence. Major sources of inequality of influence in capitalist societies (perhaps the major sources of inequality of influence) are the vast inequality of control of capital and the correlative inequality of wealth. The rich, as those who control investment, have a bargaining advantage against any elected government that challenges them. They are also able to affect the

outcomes of elections, without mentioning the bargaining advantage, by their disproportionate control of the means of communication and the mass media, as well as their ability to spend more money on political advertising. Insofar as it would redistribute resources (and hence control of investment) in an egalitarian direction, Roemer's proposal would increase equality of influence. However, central areas of economic life remain, under Roemer's proposal, governed by the market, and outside the reach of democratic processes. Moreover, it appears that there will be, under socialism à la Roemer, a distinct managerial class or caste, members of which, by virtue of their occupation, will have immediate access to skills and information which are likely to give them individually and collectively disproportionate political influence.

2 Evaluation of Transitional Proposals

As he anticipates, some socialists will be tempted to criticize his proposal on democratic grounds, and below I shall explore the appeal of that temptation. However, even if we regarded equal opportunity for political influence as somehow prior in importance to other egalitarian principles, as I shall argue that we should, such criticism might be said not to be pertinent. After all, regardless of what socialist values are, and regardless of how they are weighted against each other, that one of them is inadequately instituted by his proposal may not matter because the proposal appears to be essentially transitional in nature. When explaining why he does not include workplace democracy in his proposal he invokes the biological metaphor that 'an organism with one mutation is more likely to survive than one in which two mutations occur simultaneously', indicating that the financial restructuring he advocates is but the first step on the road. He goes on to say that he should not be taken as 'unequivocally endors[ing] introducing labor management as a second step after the first step . . . has been successfully completed', seeming to imply that his proposal is intended as an early stage in the transition. If it is the first step, we would not expect it to take us all the way: and its failure to implement a thoroughgoing liberal egalitarianism does not count against it.[4]

But what we should consider when evaluating transitional proposals is actually quite different from the factors involved in evaluating frankly utopian blueprints. If Roemer's is a transitional proposal what matters is not whether it implements some or all of the values which

socialists espouse, let alone whether it accords the proper weight to those values, but whether it can reasonably be expected to establish a political dynamic towards a system which *will* implement those values adequately. In judging that question, it need not even be relevant whether the transitional system better implements some or other, or even all, of the ideals than the present system: we might, at least in principle, have to take steps backward before it is possible to make progress. This is not to say that the ends of a socialist society justify any means whatsoever in its pursuit: it may be that there are some limits which must be respected, and that those limits may be sufficiently important that if going beyond them were the only way of attaining socialism we should abandon socialism as an end.[5] But there is no reason to think that those limits prescribe that every change in the design of social institutions must make those institutions more nearly approximate those of the socialist utopia.

That this is so poses a difficulty for Roemer concerning his reluctance to offer a weighting among the socialist values he describes. Until models of feasible socialism are put forward, he says, 'arguing about differences in preference orderings of the three desiderata is of second order importance'.[6] However, because one criterion for judging a transitional proposal is how well it will effect a transition, we need to know something about the system which it is supposed to be a transition to. Different weightings of the different values will have quite significant implications for the character of the real socialism, and hence different implications with respect to whether any given transitional proposal is pointing in the right direction. If socialism gives priority to equality of opportunity for political influence, the proponent of a transitional model will have to explain how his or her model promotes the eventual implementation of radical democracy. If economic equality is primary, then the model must make provision for the ultimate priority of such equality. It seems that for different versions of the socialist utopia quite different transitional paths might be appropriate. While our different visions of ultimate socialism may not justify the mutual hostility which has frequently characterized relations between different strands of the socialist movement, deliberation about their relative merits cannot be put off as long as Roemer seems to hope.

A second factor involved in the evaluation of transitional proposals, which would trouble us less when considering utopian visions, is political feasibility. Since transitional measures purport to effect a transition from where we are to where we seek to be, when adjudicating between rival proposals we need to consider, among other

things, which it is more possible to implement given the current or the foreseeable constellation of political and economic contingencies. In other words, the method suggested by Roemer, despite its relevance to the evaluation of frankly utopian projects, is not appropriate for evaluation of his own proposal.

3 Some Problems with Transitional Market Socialism

Agency

It is usually thought appropriate to ignore what we might call the question of rectificatory agency in discussions of political morality and even of the theory of institutions. After all, we are supposed to be talking about the institutional architecture of the society we want to see, and only when we have some idea of what it would look like can we discuss how to build it. However, Roemer's transitional proposal raises the question of agency in a sharp way. The problem is that while the proposal is self-consciously conservative by socialist standards, it is not so conservative that it does not require a radical shift of economic power and resources away from the currently existing capitalist class. In the short-to-medium term there is little prospect of Roemer's proposal finding favour internationally among the electable parties of the Left. The parties of Western social democracy are increasingly backing away from even more moderate social democratic goals, and their political approaches mimic those of the US Democratic Party. The Latin American Left has largely made its peace with international capital: the Mexican PRD has no radical reform proposals, and even the Brazilian PT poses itself as an anticorruption party of stability.[7] In the foreseeable future the mainstream international Left is unlikely to be in a position in which it can seriously put forward proposals like Roemer's and have any hope of being elected to implement them.

But the problem is not just that there is no agent to carry out the transitional proposal. A social agency which had acquired the capacity to bring about such a shift would likely have acquired the power to implement still more radical measures. The question that naturally arises, then, is why they would not claim more when they have the power to claim more?

The evolutionary metaphor

The reason Roemer would give them is signalled by the evolutionary metaphor. It is wiser, especially in the light of the dystopian experience

of the Soviet-style societies, to experiment with one feature at a time: an organism with a single mutation is more likely to survive than one with multiple mutations. It is not unreasonable to be skeptical that such considerations will move people who are capable of doing more, even if they are superbly disciplined in ways that revolutionaries rarely are. Furthermore, the evolutionary metaphor is not generally apt for questions of institutional change. Biological evolution proceeds through the mechanism of random variance/natural selection.

Random variance is a shot in the dark, which the construction of socialist or presocialist institutions cannot afford to be for reasons which Roemer elegantly elaborates. The design and construction of such institutions are products of conscious and deliberate human activity. Very often institutional changes fail to achieve the desired results precisely because they are too conservative, failing to eradicate the mechanisms which will result in reversion to the prior status quo. Some argue that post-war social democratic reforms in Western Europe were of this kind. It is also sometimes argued, perhaps more plausibly, that the reforms of the Great Society and affirmative action in the US have failed to achieve what they were intended to because they were implemented while too many institutions that promoted poverty and racism were left intact. I notice these arguments not to endorse them, but to suggest that whether or not they are good criticisms can be established only by detailed attention to the empirical facts of the cases, and not by appeal to the evolutionary metaphor.

Effectiveness

There is a further worry, which concerns the ability of Roemer's proposal to effect the transition to the socialist utopia, regardless of the relative weights appropriately accorded to socialist values. Roemer's strategy is to assume the worst about people – that there is going to be no change for the good in human character – and set up institutions accordingly. But what if, contra Roemer, human character does begin to transform under his system? Should people become less competitive, less consumption-oriented, more interested in having leisure time and controlling the circumstances of their work life (the kinds of change in human character which we would like to see) there may be mere destabilization. There is no obvious mechanism providing for further change of the system, because the rationale for the system seems to be the expectation that the human traits that guide human nature under capitalism will persist. The worry, then, is that in assuming the worst we may be promoting the worst, and thus

frustrating the possibilities for transition. A transitional proposal should provide mechanisms whereby, if desired changes in human motivation take place, further development towards the desired goal is likely to occur.

Does Roemer's proposal contain such a mechanism? It does not seem to. We might be tempted to respond on his behalf that this is a minor criticism, and that we should design and try to graft such a mechanism onto his proposal as it stands. But it is worth noting a pressure within Roemer's proposal against the eventuality of equality of opportunity for political influence and, in particular, workplace democracy. Under his scheme there is bound to emerge a distinct managerial class or layer possessing extensive knowledge and understanding of the workings of the firms and the economy. Things being as they are, we cannot expect the operation of market mechanisms to deprive them of disproportionate political and economic power, and they would be liable as a class to attempt to accumulate and retain their power. In all likelihood, even without transformations in human character, a mitigated class struggle would persist. If transformations in human character were to occur, or struggle for the next stage of socialist change (suppose that it is labour management) occurs, we want some reason to believe that things are weighed in favour of the right change.

Roemer could deflect much of the criticism I have advanced so far by treating his proposal as frankly utopian, rather than as a transition. He could say that it is, if not the end of the road, at least the furthest that we can see. As such we should directly evaluate it in terms of the three egalitarian/socialist values properly weighted, because no significant further steps are expected or hoped for. The agency problem is then irrelevant: no longer should we see the project as one of rectificatory justice. Rather we would see it as an institutional description towards which rectification should be pursued. There are parts of the essay – especially in the responses to the putative left-wing and democratic critics – in which Roemer indeed seems to be thinking of this much more as a utopian proposal and much less as a transitional one.

4 Market Socialism as a Utopian Blueprint and the Value of Democracy

Considered as a utopian proposal, Roemer's market socialism seems to reflect a commitment to the priority of distributive material equality

over equality of opportunity for political influence or democracy. In particular, workplace democracy, which has played an important role in some strands of socialist theory and agitation, is explicitly rejected. I shall briefly make a prima facie case for regarding democracy as a value at least as central as equality of opportunity for welfare and self-realization, alongside which case I shall explain why specific democratization of social institutions would likely serve well as an element of any transitional proposal. It should be borne in mind that I have no alternative institutional proposal to Roemer's and the value of these comments is circumscribed by this. Finally I shall explore the significance of a particular set of arguments for workplace democracy, and shall suggest, despite my advocacy of the priority of equality of opportunity for political influence, that Roemer would be on firmer ground if he simply denied the moral basis for workplace democracy, rather than hold it out as a more distant goal.

Pat Devine has recently argued against market socialist proposals in general that they retain the depoliticized and impersonal character of economic life under capitalism: ' . . . in my view, instead of seeking to depersonalize interdependence, socialists should be seeking to democratize it, as part of the process of moving toward a governing society based on conscious uncoerced cooperation.'[8] Although very different in other respects, Roemer's proposal is like familiar versions of market socialism in the respects to which Devine objects. While I shall explore the case for democratization, it is worth heading off the comment about the impersonal character of economic life. It seems to me that modern economic life is by its nature impersonal, and that this is no vice. We interact with vast numbers of people in morally significant ways, and the virtues of personal relations are both inadequate and inappropriate for the governance of those interactions. That we do not know, like or care about the strangers whose relations with us are mediated both by democratic and market processes reflects the complexity of modern societies and insuperable limits of human nature. What is important is that these relations, which are of necessity impersonal, are justly governed. Devine should be read as saying that thoroughgoing democratization of those relations will contribute to their eventual just governance. This is one of the questions taken up below.

The case for democratization comes in two parts. The first part advocates democracy as a central element of our political morality, and hence as a fundamental principle by which we should evaluate utopian blueprints. The second part notes the likely value of democratizing measures in facilitating transition.

First, it could be contended that democracy, or equal opportunity for political influence, appears to give expression to mutual obligations among strangers that are more central than those expressed by equality of opportunity for welfare. If our opposition to capitalism is based on our commitment to equality as expressed in Roemer's egalitarian principles, the realization of which is impeded by capitalism, then we need to look behind the principles at the reason for holding them. Why should we endorse a principle of equal opportunity for political influence? One natural answer is that ensuring that others have institutionally available to them equal control over our shared circumstances is a fairly natural requirement of the deeper moral principle that we accord them equal respect. The idea is that democratic procedures play an ineliminable role in the communal recognition of the equal moral worth of persons.

Think about how equal respect is expressed within some affective associations; for example, a group of friends. We express equal respect by consulting all who wish to assert their preferences in making decisions about where to go out to eat or which movie to go and see. If having consulted them we ignore their expressed preference in making the decision, that is usually a sign of disrespect. The requirement of equal respect is more stringent, of course, in involuntary associations, and especially among strangers: those who (unlike our friends) have yet to prove to us that they are inappropriate objects of our respect.[9]

It might be objected that equal opportunity for political influence is too weak a principle to capture what is required by political equality. For example, in one sense of opportunity, as long as citizens have equal resources and equal votes, vote buying is consistent with equal opportunity for political influence. If each had, at the age of majority, the opportunity to retain their vote and to buy as many others as everyone else had the opportunity to buy, they would each have equal opportunity for future voting. Yet this is incompatible with our normal intuitions about the propriety of making the right to vote inalienable, and hence with democracy as we normally conceive it. For this reason it might be better to call the principle supported by the notion of equal respect 'equal availability of influence', which prohibits such foreclosure on future influence, and requires that institutions be designed to facilitate the relatively easy re-entry into influential participation of long-term abstainers.

While it is easy to find a case for equal availability of political influence from the deeper moral principle of equal respect, it is more difficult to make a case for equality of opportunity for welfare (or

self-realization or social status for that matter). There do not appear to be similar micro-cases within affective associations where respect (or any other value) is realized by providing strictly equal opportunities for welfare, especially if welfare is conceived as actual preference satisfaction. This is not to say that equality of opportunity for welfare is not valuable, but it does seem, prima facie, to express less central impersonal obligations than does equal availability of political influence.[10]

The second part of my case shows there are three reasons for thinking that specific democratization will be a valuable element of a proposed transition. The first two hold, however Roemer's egalitarian values are weighted; the third relies on the idea that democracy will be a central element of the socialist society we hope to achieve.

The first reason is that, because democracy is a much more widely shared value in contemporary societies than is material egalitarianism, a proposal giving it a central place has more chance of being adopted. Democracy is widely valued partly because it can be argued for from a range of different moral and political perspectives (including many which are false but nevertheless widely believed), and because it at least appears to impose less extensive mutual obligations among citizens than, for example, material equality. As noted above, despite Roemer's concentration on anticipating objections from the Left, his own proposal is far beyond the bounds of respectable political debate in the US and many other industrialized countries. In other words we should not let the complaints of some that it is insufficiently extreme obscure the fact that it is nevertheless extreme.

The second prima facie reason for favouring transitional proposals focussing on democratization is instrumental. Assuming that egalitarian principles are true and rationally acceptable, appropriate increases in democracy will make it easier for socialists to argue successfully for those principles. It will also, by increasing the power of most citizens over collective circumstances, including social institutions, increase their ability to reform or revolutionize those institutions in the ways that socialists support. As long as we can persuade a large number of people of the correctness of socialist political morality, increased equality of opportunity for political influence will better enable people to secure (and maintain) the institution of that morality. A good increased democratization proposal will be able to invoke this fact as a mechanism by which further transition can be effected.

Finally, whereas market socialism relies for its success on material incentives and rewards, and hence both relies on and reinforces economically self-interested behaviour of the kind which capitalist

markets similarly rely on and reward, radical democratization of the right sort, albeit in a different sphere, rewards rational deliberation about the good of society as a whole. As such it is more likely than a market socialist proposal to train and develop the kinds of motivation which, ultimately, will make possible full socialism (on the assumption that full socialism includes significantly different motivations and human characters than does capitalism).

In the absence of a reasonably well developed democratizing institutional proposal, of course, these considerations are far from conclusive, and anyway they argue for a supplement to, rather than a replacement of, Roemer's proposal (as long as his is taken as transitional). Nevertheless they suggest the desirability of more rather than less emphasis on equalizing the availability of political influence, and raise the question (which it is not possible for me to answer) whether more democracy could be injected into a modification of Roemer's proposal without undermining it. Certainly, if Roemer's proposal turns out to be incompatible with radical democracy, the work he has done has shifted a burden onto radical democrats to describe feasible radically democratic institutions.

That said, there is an argument against premature democratization which we should take seriously, and which may appear to support Roemer's against as yet unconstructed democratizing proposals. This is that until people have transformed their consciousness, democratization will tend to allow for discrimination and oppression by personal and political means (rather than by impersonal non-political means). Yet being discriminated against by the state, consciously, may have a much worse effect on the opportunities for self-realization of the victims than the impersonal discrimination of market forces. Why? Because it may be much more detrimental to our self-respect. When the normal operation of market processes disfavors us, at least those of us who understand what kinds of process are at work can console ourselves by saying 'well, that's just the way things go: it could have happened to anyone.' But when we are disfavored to exactly the same degree by democratic processes we have to say: 'This was the foreseen or intended result of deliberate action on the part of my peers: I suffered either because they intended it or because their advantage mattered more to them than my disadvantage.'

While this concern needs to be taken seriously, I doubt that the consequences of democracy will be as the argument suggests. In fact democracy at the national or community level is as impersonal in many ways as the market, at least as long as it is not required to resolve very severe conflicts, such as longstanding tribal rivalries.

Furthermore, under capitalist markets, at least, few people are sufficiently cool about their own situations that they are able to attribute their own disadvantages to the arbitrariness of market processes, and hence insulate their own self-respect. So I doubt there will be much difference between market and democratic allocations in terms of the self-respect of those disadvantaged by the outcomes.

However, the objection to premature democratization has more power when applied to institutions in which affective and personal ties play a significant role in governing interactions. For example, in smaller workplaces, where the collective life of the work force is infused with affective ties and personal interaction, democratization, at least prior to the kinds of transformation in human character of which Roemer is skeptical, may give rise to conflicts and oppressions within the workplace which constitute barriers to self-realization of some at least as severe as those constituted by the domination at the point of production experienced under capitalism as we know it. Now I shall turn to the question of whether there are principled reasons for trying to institute democracy in the workplace.

5 Workplace Democracy

As I have suggested already, one feature of Roemer's proposal which socialists are likely to want to modify, especially if it is considered as a utopian blueprint, concerns the organization of the workplace. Roemer explicitly rejects labor management or workplace democracy, a demand which has characterized at least one central strand of recent socialist thought and of recent Western socialist practice. Would an adequate model of a socialist utopia include labor management or democratization of the workplace? This question can be answered through the answer to a slightly different question: is there a right to workplace democracy? If there is such a right, then any proposal which failed to ensure that every worker could work in a democratic workplace or firm would fail to be just and hence be unacceptable as a utopian model. If there is no such right then Roemer's failure to provide such assurance yields no justice-based reason for rejecting his model as a utopian proposal.

I understand a right to workplace democracy as follows. Like a right to democracy at the national or community level, it is a right borne and exercised by individuals. The right protects a claim to be able to work in a workplace or firm within which all employees have an institutionally guaranteed right to participate as equals in the

decision making. It includes the requirement that any who have more institutionally facilitated power over decisions be elected by and accountable to a body in which all members have an equal number of equally weighted votes, and which includes at least all the employees of the workplace or firm. While this claim must be balanced against claims protected by other individual rights, such as freedom of conscience, and freedom of association, it can only be thought of as a right if we think that it should be upheld even if upholding it has significantly deleterious effects on productivity both in the workplace and in the economy as a whole.

What might be the moral basis for a right to workplace democracy? I shall consider three arguments.

First, one might appeal to Roemer's principle of equality of opportunity for self-realization, and argue that democracy in the workplace ameliorates alienated labour in ways essential for widespread access to self-realization. In fact this (usually in combination with the idea that workplace democracy enhances productivity) is probably the standard argument for workplace democracy within the Marxian political tradition. In his early writings, Marx characterizes labor under capitalism as alienated in the sense that the worker has control of none of the following aspects: the decisions about what she produces; the process by which she labors; and what happens to the fruits of her labor once they have been produced.[11] The contrast, it is fairly evident, is with some forms of pre-industrial and early industrial artisanry in which the laborer would have as much control of at least some of the above factors as market or quasimarket relations would allow.

Of course the model of the artisan does not in itself support any argument for workplace democracy based on the ideal of unalienated laboring. Given that model the most natural argument would be for a society of free and roughly equally endowed individual producers. The argument for a right to workplace democracy becomes relevant when it is acknowledged either that such a society is unfeasible in modern conditions or that it is undesirable on other grounds.[12]

If that is acknowledged, then it is thought either inevitable or desirable that most production be carried out collectively. In such conditions workers will not, of course, be able to have full control over the three factors over which capitalist norms of productivity deprive them of any control. But workplace democracy can provide them with partial control over those factors: it provides each with control equal to that of each of their workmates, and hence ameliorates the condition of unalienated laboring equally for all. Thus it is required by the principle of equal opportunity for self-realization.

I doubt that such an argument for a right to workplace democracy would be compelling. First, there are different kinds of work. Some kinds, especially intellectual and very complex manual labor, may afford a great deal of self-realization when they are unalienated, and very little when they are alienated. But for other kinds of work the gap will be much smaller; if it exists at all. Many kinds of work will be as fulfilling as they can be as long as the worker has the time, materials and permission to do the job properly. But this does not require that they have full control of the process, only that they not be impeded from doing the work as it ought to be done. Some forms of work, it might be argued, are not going to be very rewarding intrinsically, regardless of how much control the laborer has. Furniture removal, for example, affords limited scope for self-expression. A bad furniture remover is likely to be very frustrated and unhappy, but an excellent furniture remover is likely to get most of her self-realization from her non-working activities, even when she has full control of the work process, from beginning to end.

In fact, it is reasonable to dispute the speculation about human nature that most people could get significant self-realization from the process of work itself. But even if it were possible for human character to change in such a direction it is not clear what reason there would be deliberately to encourage that change through the design of transitional institutions. Rather than encourage humans to change into beings which find labor rewarding it might be preferable, if possible, to encourage them to find their solitude and their relations with one another rewarding, and to promote technological changes which diminish the amount of time they have to spend working to provide themselves with desirable material comforts.

Second, the principle of equal opportunity for self-realization does not disaggregate potential sources of self-realization in a way that would be needed to support the right to workplace democracy. What it requires is that each person face a diverse set of life activities which afford reasonable expectations of self-realization, and that that set is equal for each person. If Julian has the opportunity to work in a democratic workplace and Sandy does not, but nevertheless faces an array of options liable to afford him as much self-realization as Julian's options are liable to afford him, Sandy has no complaint emanating from the principle. In other words, even if workplace democracy is generally conducive to self-realization, this does not make it something anyone has a right to independent of considering what other opportunities they have for self-realization.

A second possible argument for the right to workplace democracy is

that it is directly implied by the principle of equal availability of political influence. But while that principle does require that the economy as a whole be placed within the domain of democratic decision making, I doubt that it implies a right to workplace democracy. Some firms have a substantial impact on our shared circumstances while others do not, and this difference is not directly correlated with the size of the firms. If we tried to implement equal availability of political influence primarily through workplace democracy we would fail to equalize because of this difference. Furthermore, even under socialism, some persons (for example, those with severe and irremediable disabilities) will not be able to work, but will still be properly part of the democratic polity. Finally, we share our circumstances with far more people than our workmates, and while much of what is important in the workplace can be controlled through democratically determined national regulation, much of what is important outside the workplace cannot be achieved through workplace decisions. Yet if we see workplace democracy as a less than central means for achieving equal availability of political influence it is not properly seen as a right in itself but merely as a mechanism which we may or may not employ to implement something which is a right.

One might think instead that the case for a right to democracy in the workplace is, if not a direct implication of it, at least a natural extension of the case for a right to democracy at the national or community level. This is Cohen's view, as expressed in the following argument, which he calls the parallel case argument:

> The best justification for the requirement of democratic governance of the state is that a political society is a cooperative activity, governed by public rules, that is expected to operate for the mutual advantage of the members. Anyone who contributes to such an activity, who has the capacity to assess its rules, and who is subject to them has a right to participate in their determination. But economic organisations are cooperative activities governed by rules, and they are expected to operate for the advantage of each member. Workers in such enterprises contribute to the cooperative activity, have the capacity to assess the rules that regulate it, and are subject to them. So they have a right to determine the regulative rules of their workplaces.[13]

In fact, of course, this is only one of several possible parallel case arguments. The content of a parallel case argument for workplace democracy depends on the content of whatever you take to be the best case for democracy at the national or community level. So, for example, Richard Arneson does not recognize democratic rights as

intrinsically just, but argues for them on the grounds that democracy is the best available system of governance with respect to guaranteeing other more fundamental individual rights.[14] A case for democracy which is less liberal than Arneson's and Cohen's might argue that meaningful engagement in the determination of collective affairs is an essential component of any truly valuable life, and so democracy is mandatory on the grounds that everyone be provided with the opportunity to live well. The parallel case to the Arneson argument would be that we have fundamental rights that might be breached in the workplace but for the presence of direct democratic accountability. The parallel case for the non-liberal argument would be that, because a large part of one's life is spent in the workplace, a full opportunity to live a valuable participatory life requires that democracy be available in the workplace.

So what argument is there against there being a right to workplace democracy? Arneson has argued against it on the grounds that it violates a neutrality constraint on state action. Widely mandated workplace democracy would, he presumes, have significant material costs. These costs and the correlative benefits of participation would be assessed differently by different people, presumably depending on how much they enjoyed participating. But state neutrality 'forbids the use of state power to confer special benefits on some citizens merely because they have tastes of a sort that are favored or deemed more admirable than the tastes of others'.[15] Hence state mandated workplace democracy would be unacceptable, since it would indeed confer its benefits and disbenefits differentially.

Arneson uses this argument against the parallel case for his own argument for democracy (that democratic rights tend to protect other more fundamental rights). However, it in fact impugns only the non-liberal parallel case argument, which singles out a particular way of life as more worthy, and hence to be given more institutional support, than others. Neither Cohen's or Arneson's arguments for democracy deem participation as uniquely valuable or even as a particularly good thing, and nor do the cases parallel to their arguments. In both cases the requirement that participation be available is not a function of the distinctive value of the participatory life, but rather of the fact that making it institutionally available fulfills obligations we have towards others.

It is true that mandated workplace democracy would violate a different neutrality constraint. We might accept, contra Cohen, that justice does not require that workplaces be democratically organized, and also believe that neutrality of a different sort constrains

democratic decisions; namely, that the state should do nothing which makes it easier to fulfill some conception of the good life than others. Then, noting that mandating workplace democracy would have this effect, we might reject it as an impermissible democratic decision. But neutrality conceived this way is an extremely strong constraint on democratic decision making. The constraint would have the effect of making it impermissible for the state to provide most public goods, most of which have differential effects on different individuals' pursuits of their ways of life. So minimal a state ill fits the ambition of socialist morality and leaves little to democratic discretion. As such, I think this constraint should be rejected.

Alternatively, the scope of neutrality could be reinterpreted to call into question both the liberal arguments for workplace democracy, by understanding it as requiring that no possibly controversial values inform the design of social institutions. I think this gives neutrality an implausibly wide scope. Furthermore, on this understanding of neutrality, the liberal cases we have considered for democracy at the national or community level would have to be rejected: the value of interpersonal respect which appears to underlie Cohen's argument, and of fundamental individual rights which inform Arneson's argument, are non-neutral in the relevant sense. So, unless we are willing to give up altogether on the idea that there is a right to democracy, neutrality will not serve as an adequate basis for principled opposition to mandated workplace democracy.

However, most defenders of capitalism as we know it, even if they are friendly to democratic governance, will attempt to block the parallelism by retorting that there is a suppressed premise in both of the liberal cases for democracy at the national level. What makes the case for democracy at that level so powerful is that citizens generally have no realistic option of exit. In other words, the involuntary nature of the association is what makes democracy obligatory. For voluntary associations, from which members do have a realistic option of exit, the case is much less clear: non-Catholics do not find the undemocratic nature of the Roman Catholic church one of its objectionable features, while non-Chinese do generally find the non-democratic nature of China an objectionable feature.

But, the defender of capitalism without workplace democracy will say, workers are simply not in the same situation. They are free to choose where and whether to work, and can quit if they do not like the regime at their workplace. The labor contract is a voluntary contract for mutual benefit, and having entered into it freely and with full knowledge the worker has no grounds for complaint.[16]

Socialists (even of Roemer's kind) are certainly liable to respond that the freedom of contract for the worker is at best limited and at worst illusory under capitalist property relations.[17] So the case for workplace democracy under capitalism may remain strong. However, under a welfare state, or at least under socialist economy, the case immediately weakens, because if something like universal basic income grant is available,[18] it may be much more reasonable to consider the contract genuinely free. After all, if working is optional, then which workplace you work in is also optional in the relevant sense.

As such it may be reasonable to think of workplaces as more like voluntary associations, and hence the case for democracy at that level is less compelling. On the rights protection argument for democracy, this is because the option of exit from the workplace gives the worker other ways than participation of protecting her rights. In the Cohen argument, it is because the voluntary nature of the association robs the argument for democracy of an essential premise.

The proponent of a parallel case argument might respond to this that in fact the non-voluntary nature of political society is not really relevant to the case for democracy at the national level. After all, most democrats will be reluctant to admit that if we were to open the borders, and provide massive material compensation to potential immigrants so that the otherwise enormous personal costs of emigration were genuinely offset, there would be no obligation to maintain democratic institutions at the national level.

But opening the borders and providing massive compensation are not analogous to providing something like an unconditional basic income grant. A basic income grant allows the option of not being in any workplace and hence not being subject to any workplace rules at all. But open borders only give people a realistic choice between sets of rules, not a choice of living under no rules at all. Such a choice is the choice of not living in a society, and as such it is not possible to compensate someone meaningfully in such a way as to make it a realistic option. The non-voluntary nature of living in a political society is hence an ineliminable feature, and it is not clear to me that there is a coherent thought experiment which enables us to detach it so the case of democracy at the national level can be made genuinely parallel to that of workplace democracy in an economy with a basic income grant. It is reasonable, nevertheless, to think that the case for a right to workplace democracy is at best much weaker in a socialist society than in a capitalist society.

Notice that the considerations invoked here, unlike those invoked in the earlier argument expressing mere unease about democratizing

small workplaces, do not rely on there being no transformation in human character. That argument could have been defeated by showing, for example, that human beings were much more tolerant, reasonable and altruistic than we currently suspect, and therefore the predicted conflicts would not arise. Workplace democracy would then be unwise in transition, but would be a proper part of the utopian blueprint. But consideration of Cohen's argument raises the question of whether there is a case for workplace democracy even in the utopian blueprint, regardless of whether human character transforms.

In other words, once egalitarian economic relations have been achieved, the case for a right to workplace democracy seems to fade somewhat, at least if it is modeled on liberal cases for democracy at the level of the community and the nation state.

Showing that there is no right to workplace democracy does not mean that workplace democracy should never be introduced in a socialist society. If, as some argue, democratic practices in the workplace often have productivity enhancing effects, then policies favoring it would presumably be selected as appropriate by either the managers of firms or by the democratic process within a market socialist society. Of course, whether workplace democracy enhances productivity will depend partly on the nature of the work, and also on the structure of the background economic institutions. For reasons about which he is very clear, Roemer's proposal makes it particularly unlikely that workplace democracy will enhance productivity. But there would only be principled reasons for seeking background institutions which made it more likely if there were a right to workplace democracy. And only if there is a right to workplace democracy should a utopian blueprint be faulted for leaving it out of the institutional design.

6 Concluding Remark

Some of my comments in Section 4 will identify me as among Roemer's democratic critics. I believe that socialism requires dramatically increased democratic control over our collective circumstances, and it is evident that I suspect that Roemer's proposal does too little, whether as a transitional proposal or as a utopian blueprint, to advance this. It could be that Roemer simply believes that recent history has given us reasons to be extremely skeptical that increased democratic control over our collective circumstances is achievable, at least with morally acceptable consequences. It will be evident that I disagree, but that is not the point. The aim of my paper is to urge

socialists to give serious scrutiny to Roemer's socialist principles, and to investigate the question of what weight should be accorded to each. Proper evaluation of his proposal, and of any other proposed transition or utopia, requires resolution of this question, which he deliberately leaves unresolved.[19]

Notes

1. John E. Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1994.
2. See Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, New York: International 1970, p. 53. I say only that he appears to endorse it because he strictly says only that communist society makes this opulent life possible, and not that this is a or the reason why we should choose communism.
3. Both Ronald Dworkin and Richard Arneson appear to be committed to such a view of neutrality. See Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1985 and Arneson, 'Neutrality and Utility', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 20 (1990), pp. 215–40. Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986, elaborates a defence of liberalism which is clearly non-neutral, but which also is not egalitarian.
4. Roemer, p. 93.
5. Ibid., p. 13.
6. For a discussion of the limits on what socialists may do to advance socialist ends, see Norman Geras, 'Our Morals: The Ethics of Revolution', *Socialist Register* (1989), pp. 185–211.
7. The PT has done this with such success that *The Economist* magazine regularly praised its former presidential Candidate Lula. See, for example, 'Lula on the Road', *The Economist*, March 12th 1994, p. 47.
8. Pat Devine, 'Market Socialism or Participatory Planning', *Review of Radical Political Economics*, vol. 24, nos. 3 and 4, (1992), pp. 67–89.
9. I develop the argument of the previous three paragraphs in much more detail in 'Egalitarianism and Equal Availability of Political Influence', *Journal of Political Philosophy* (forthcoming).
10. Notice that on this explanation of the centrality of the value of democracy, the democratic principle is not a maximizing one. The ambition of a principle of political equality is to ensure that people have available equal influence over some appropriately determined sphere. Rights of privacy, for example, lie outside that sphere, and a principle of political equality has no ambition to increase the total amount of political influence by allowing democratic interference in the so-called private sphere.
11. It is also usually thought that the fragmented nature of work under the division of labor within capitalism contributes to alienation. I neglect this feature, because democracy in the workplace would do nothing to guarantee its elimination. For Marx's account of alienated labor see Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, New York: International 1964, pp. 106–19.
12. I ignore here the possibility that the objectionability of alienation might press us to redirect the development of our technology in less alienating ways.
13. Joshua Cohen, 'The Economic Basis of Deliberative Democracy', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 6, no. 2 (1987), pp. 25–50 at p. 27.
14. Richard Arneson, 'Democratic Rights at National and Workplace Levels', in Copp, Hampton, Roemer, eds, *The Idea of Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993, pp. 118–48.
15. Arneson, p. 143.

16. Arneson also points this out and draws what are ultimately similar conclusions from it.
17. G. A. Cohen, 'The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12 (1983), pp. 3–33.
18. Philippe Van Parjis, 'Why Surfers Should Be Fed: A Liberal Case for an Unconditional Basic Income', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (1991), pp. 101–31 and Andrew Levine 'Fairness to Idleness', *Economics and Philosophy* (forthcoming) both argue for a basic income grant.
19. I'm grateful to some of the other contributors to this volume as well as Daniel Wikler, Daniel Hausman, and Lynn Glueck for discussions of previous versions of this chapter, and to Randy Blumenstein, Noel Carrol, A. J. Julius, David Pagac and Kirk White for discussions of the section on workplace democracy.

12

What Do Socialists Want?

Richard J. Arneson

Discussions of the ethics of socialism have tended to focus more on the scholastic issue of what Karl Marx really thought than on the substantive issue of what socialists ought to affirm. For the past several years John Roemer has brought to bear the techniques of contemporary theoretical economics on the latter issue, with illuminating results.[1] In *A Future for Socialism* he characterizes the socialist project in terms of commitment to the goals of 'equality of opportunity for (1) self-realization and welfare, (2) political influence, and (3) social status'.[2] As he recognizes, each of the terms in this sketch calls for interpretation. In these comments I do some preliminary spadework toward clarifying these proposed ideals and revealing their mutual tensions. Although I criticize Roemer's tentative affirmation of principles of equality of opportunity, at the end of this comment I strongly endorse Roemer's call for articulate clarity about the relationship between plans of economic and political reconstruction that might reasonably march under the socialist banner and the moral principles that would justify such plans in specified circumstances.

Equal Opportunity for Political Influence

It is readily shown that the affirmation of these three abstract goals, far from having the quality of truism, is highly controversial and indeed probably incorrect. To illustrate, consider the single ideal of equality of opportunity for political influence. This phrase has a nice radical democratic ring to it. The socialist, one might suppose should not be contented with merely formal democratic citizenship rights, which are compatible with the control of politics behind the scenes by fat cats. 'Equal opportunity for political influence' announces a substantive ideal of democratic equality in the sphere of citizenship. But under examination the ideal shows itself to be not quite what we had in mind and not truly an ethically desirable goal.