2. John E. Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1994, p. 11.
3. On deliberative democracy, see Jürgen Habermas, *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, tr. Thomas McCarthy, Boston: Beacon Press 1979; also Joshua Cohen, 'Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy', in Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit, eds, *The Good Polity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1989, pp. 17–34.
4. Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, p. 12.
5. See Richard J. Arneson, 'Socialism as the Extension of Democracy', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 145–71; also Arneson, 'Democratic Rights at National and Workplace Levels', in David Copp, Jean Hampton and John E. Roemer, eds, *The Idea of Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993, pp. 118–48.
6. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, tr. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, New York: Charles H. Kerr 1906, p. 196.
7. On separate spheres of distribution, see Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*, New York: Basic Books 1983. See also David Miller, 'Complex Equality', and Richard Arneson, 'Against "Complex Equality"' both in David Miller and Michael Walzer, eds, *Pluralism, Justice, and Equality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (forthcoming).
8. The idea that Marx is concerned to eliminate inequalities of class hierarchy rather than all manner of social inequalities is explored in Allen Wood, 'Marx and Equality', in John E. Roemer, ed., *Analytical Marxism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 283–303.
9. See Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, New York: Basic Books 1974; also David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986.
10. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 581.
11. Jon Elster, 'Self-realization in Work and Politics: The Marxist Conception of the Good Life', *Social Philosophy and Policy* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1986), pp. 97–126.
12. The Tiny Tim example is drawn from G. A. Cohen, 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', *Ethics* 99, no. 3 (1989), pp. 906–44.
13. Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, p. 12.
14. I borrow this point from Marc Fleurbaey.
15. On the issue, what sort of equality is intrinsically morally important, see Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1992.
16. John E. Roemer, 'The Morality and Efficiency of Market Socialism', *Ethics* 102, no. 3 (April 1992), pp. 448–64.
17. See Paul Weirich, 'Utility Tempered with Equality', *Nous* 17, no. 3 (September 1983), pp. 423–39.
18. This point is explored in Allen Wood, 'The Marxian critique of Justice', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1972), pp. 244–82.
19. See Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*; also Roemer, 'Property Relations vs. Surplus Value in Marxian Exploitation' and 'Should Marxists Be Interested in Exploitation?', both reprinted in his *Egalitarian Perspectives*, pp. 37–64 and pp. 65–96; also Richard Arneson, 'What's Wrong with Exploitation?', *Ethics* 91, no. 2 (January 1981), pp. 202–27; and Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990, ch. 5.

13

Saving Socialism and/or Abandoning It

Andrew Levine

I confess to a deep ambivalence about *A Future for Socialism*.[1] On the one hand, it is plain that much of what Roemer says about socialism, both critically and constructively, is on target. Anyone committed to retrieving what remains vital in the socialist tradition cannot fail to appreciate the importance of this contribution to socialist theory. On the other hand, it is hard to resist the conclusion that socialism after Roemer is hardly socialism at all; that in order to save socialism, he found it necessary to abandon it. My aim in these remarks will be to articulate this ambivalence and to try to move beyond it. To this end, I shall take issue mainly with Roemer's claims about what socialists want.

Roemer thinks that socialists, whether they knew it or not, have always wanted what contemporary liberal egalitarians want: equality construed in roughly the way(s) that have emerged in the ongoing 'equality of what?' debate.[2] Roemer's aim is to show how equality, so conceived, can be achieved or at least approximated without sacrificing economic well-being. His central claim is that socializing property relations, through a radical transformation of control and revenue rights in non-labor productive assets, is instrumental and perhaps indispensable for realizing equality, and that market mechanisms are instrumental and almost certainly indispensable for economic well-being. *A Future for Socialism* is mainly devoted to developing and defending these theses.

What I will suggest is that those of us, like Roemer, who want the socialist tradition to develop and flourish risk being led astray by Roemer's account of what socialists want. Socialists do want equality and efficiency, though perhaps not quite, as Roemer assumes, in the sense(s) that have come to dominate contemporary academic discourse. They also want peace, sound environmental policies, the end of racial, sexual and ethnic oppression and many other laudable

objectives that most liberals want too. But at least some socialists, those whose political and theoretical positions derive from Marx, want something that liberals do not and that liberal theory cannot properly accommodate: they want *communism*.[3] My quarrel with Roemer's account of socialism's future therefore has to do, in the first instance, with what his vision of socialism leaves out and the implications of these omissions for the moral philosophical underpinnings of socialist politics. However, the ambivalence I will go on to exhibit has to do mainly with the politics *A Future for Socialism* suggests or, more precisely, with the implications of Roemer's prescriptions for the strategies of political movements that aim to continue the tradition(s) of nineteenth- and twentieth-century socialism. In short, I am dubious that in the absence of a political vision that transcends the liberal egalitarian horizon, Roemer's proposed reforms, whatever their merits, can help to get us from where we now are to where socialists ultimately want to be.

The Marxist tradition has made a virtue of undertheorizing communism.[4] A democratic commitment to the 'self-emancipation' of the working class and a corresponding opposition to social engineering partly account for this reticence. No doubt there are less principled explanations as well. This is not the place to attempt what Marx himself forswore. But even if I can offer no 'recipes for the cookshops of the future' to contrast with liberal egalitarian visions, I can draw on the understanding of communism that for decades has directed socialist practice. Communism implies a form of community that supersedes market society. It does not follow from this observation that socialism is incompatible with markets. Indeed, Roemer may be right to insist that any feasible socialism must rely on market mechanisms. But, if we are not to abandon socialism in order to save it, we must do so in a way that does not block the way towards the realization of a genuinely communist social order, *beyond* market society. In market societies, individuals' behaviors are not directly coordinated at the societal level; what occurs in the aggregate emerges as an unintended consequence of voluntary bilateral exchanges, motivated by self-interest. In contrast, under communism, coordination at the level of the whole society is achieved directly and democratically; as in the just state of Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, 'the whole people rule concerning the whole people'. But, again following Rousseau's lead, when the whole people rule, they are not motivated, as in market societies and also in mainstream understandings of democratic collective choice, by self-interest. Their votes do not register preferences for alternative outcomes in contention, but opinions as to

what is best for the collective entity they freely constitute. In other words, under communism, individuals view themselves as indivisible parts of collective entities, and they make the interests of these collectivities their own. In Rousseau's terms, they place themselves 'under the supreme direction of the general will', that principle of volition that aims at the interest of the whole community. Thus individuals' behaviors are coordinated in consequence of a consensus on ends around communal interests. Under communism therefore there exists a form of community that even the most radically egalitarian liberalism cannot contemplate. It is this vision, along with equality and other objectives socialists and liberals share, that has sustained generations of socialist militants. To fail to accord it pride of place or even to acknowledge it at all is to misrepresent what at least Marxist socialists want.

To establish the legitimacy of this concern, I will begin by venturing some thoughts about the place of *A Future for Socialism* in the trajectory of Roemer's own intellectual and political evolution. To do so is also, unavoidably, to reflect on its place in the theoretical and political tradition inaugurated by Marx. Roemer has been a central figure in the 'analytical Marxist' movement, an intellectual current that once promised, and may yet deliver, a reconstructed Marxist theory (or theories). But it may also appear with historical hindsight that analytical Marxism provided a way to abandon Marxism or rather to collapse what is living in it into what Marxists would once have called 'bourgeois' social science and philosophy. Since the future of Marxism is relevant to the future of socialism, a brief look at how Marxist socialism stands after nearly two decades of analytical investigations, focussing especially on Roemer's own contributions to the subject, is an apt starting-point for reflecting on *A Future for Socialism*.

Marxism after Roemer

Non-Marxists and even anti-Marxists used to concede, following Schumpeter's account in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*,[5] that there was a hard core of good social theory in Marx's work, interspersed with many bad, politically motivated 'prophesies'. But then it was claimed, following Schumpeter again, that virtually all of what was worthwhile had passed into the mainstream intellectual culture. I think there is much to fault in these observations. The claim that some of Marx's ideas have been assimilated into received understandings of the ways societies work is beyond dispute. Among these assimilated

notions is the concept of capitalism itself; another, the idea that socialism is capitalism's historical alternative. For many decades, it was not just Marxists who held these views; (nearly) everybody did. Now, however, the old consensus is gone. *A Future for Socialism* is in part a reaction to this situation, in part a contribution to the dissolution of the old assumptions.

I can only report on these transformed understandings from my own, very parochial vantage point. When I say 'we' and 'us', I mean Western (indeed American or, at least, English-speaking) leftist academics of the generation of 1968 plus or minus one or two. Analytical Marxism was one of our creations. In contrast to most other intellectual currents that have identified with Marxism, it was always a product of a university culture, with hardly any connection to political parties or even to social movements. From its inception, analytical Marxism has been, for better or worse, an intellectual tendency without a political constituency. Nevertheless, its understandings of socialism and capitalism were largely shared by the socialist Left throughout the world. In any case, this is the context of Roemer's ongoing engagement with Marxist theory and socialism.

Like everyone else, we all used to know what socialism was, whether or not we identified expressly with analytical Marxism. Under socialism, the means of production (at least the important ones) were socialized. We were not always of one mind about what 'socialized' meant; some thought it meant 'democratized', others did not. But since we all knew that capitalism was the historical alternative to socialism, and since we were sure that under capitalism the principal means of production were privately owned, we were inclined to identify socialism with the absence of private property in (important) means of production. Even those of us who thought that this was not sufficient, perhaps because democracy was indispensable, agreed that the abolition of private property was necessary for socialism, and were sure that we understood what that meant. Analyses of private and public ownership were therefore off the research agenda; there was no need to investigate what was clear enough. Nowadays, of course, these understandings no longer pass muster, and it is widely assumed that the demise of 'actually existing socialism' somehow explains this change. But in retrospect it is incomprehensible that the old understandings were ever secure.

For one thing, it was a commonplace long before 1989 that ownership is a bundle of rights to control assets and to benefit from them and that what we call private property designates a fairly diverse set of bundles. It was also a commonplace that ownership

rights are constantly evolving and frequently contested. Yet when we thought about socialism and capitalism, we tended to focus on extreme positions: unrestricted rights to benefit and control, on the one hand, and state ownership, on the other. To be sure, there are many things that individuals own privately from which, according to prevailing law and custom, they may rightfully benefit absolutely and use as they please (so long as they do not harm others). But this paradigm of private ownership seldom applies to anything that might be considered a principal means of production. And it is far from clear, in any case, that state ownership is its antithesis.

It is also puzzling why the end of (big-C) Communism had such a momentous impact on current understandings of socialism. Some of us were persuaded that the economic system in place in the Soviet Union was 'state capitalist' or, in any case, not socialist. However, most of us probably did believe that 'actually existing socialist' societies were indeed socialist, even though their socialism was hardly what we wanted. They were socialist because they had abolished private property in (principal) means of production, replacing private property and markets with state property and central planning. Many of us questioned the wisdom of relying on plans instead of markets, but we were remarkably uncritical of the Soviet form of public ownership. However much we reproached the Soviet Union, and this was, after all, the pivot of left politics, we never questioned the idea that public property was necessarily state property.

We might have been led to a more critical attitude had we reflected more on the existence of state property in the capitalist world. But this was the occasion for yet another theoretical aporia. It has never been clear, in any case, just how, if at all, state ownership challenges capitalism. Those of us who worried about this issue used to say that state-owned enterprises in capitalist societies were not islands of socialism, even as we identified public ownership with state ownership, because the state only took over firms that were failing in capitalist markets and/or because these enterprises interacted with private firms in market transactions in just the way that private firms would and/or because they had internal organizations that were not significantly different from those of privately owned firms. But these defensive claims, whatever their merits, hardly vindicate an uncritical identification of socialism with state ownership of major productive assets.

In view of our understanding of property rights, our various attitudes towards the Soviet Union, and our experience with state property in capitalist economies, it is remarkable that we were once

so sure what socialism and capitalism, public and private property were. The pressing question, however, is what they actually are. This has been a central focus of Roemer's recent work. *A Future for Socialism* reflects the advances in understanding he has made. For our purposes now, what matters in Roemer's view is that private property becomes public property at the point at which revenue rights in major productive assets are distributed across large sectors of the (relevant) population.[6] Under socialism, therefore, revenue rights help to equalize income and not, as under capitalism, to generate inequalities. This understanding of public property and, by extension, of socialism itself helps to motivate Roemer's account of what socialists want.

So too does Roemer's view of the connection between Marxism and moral theory. Just as we once thought we knew what socialism was, there was a time when we were confident about 'their morals and ours'. Or at least we were sure about theirs. Since some of us thought, following Marx himself, that it was politically otiose to launch moral arguments for socialism (because the 'laws of motion' of capitalist societies rendered such arguments unnecessary), since we knew that 'the ruling ideas' (including the moral assessments) of any period are just the ideas of the ruling class, and since Marx and Marxists disparaged moralizing repeatedly, more than a few of us were officially hostile to 'morality' and defensive about moral theory. These hesitations waned throughout the 1970s. But the conviction that their morals were not ours nevertheless lingered. They had bourgeois values and ideas, but what did we have? Alienation, perhaps; but some of us (in the grip of Althusserian 'theory') disliked this concept, with its neo-Hegelian flavor and its position on the wrong side of 'the epistemological break'. So we focussed on exploitation, a concept with an impeccable Marxist pedigree that, among other things, appeared to have superseded the 'alienation' of Marx's early writings. In addition, exploitation provided a point of contact with the theory of justice, and therefore with mainstream social and moral philosophy after Rawls. Thus we could remain in the academy with a good conscience, and without marginalizing ourselves or being marginalized. But then, alas, Roemer maintained that we were wrong to be concerned with exploitation.[7] At best, the idea was a proxy for injustice, and it wasn't a perfectly reliable proxy at that. Not everyone agreed, for reasons that I cannot pursue here, but, partly thanks to Roemer's influence, exploitation began to diminish as a distinctive normative concern. Our morals began to look increasingly like theirs.

Our distinctiveness in the social sciences was quickly fading too.

Not long ago, to us they were vulgar (albeit technically sophisticated) economists, while we (in their eyes) were 'minor post-Ricardians'. In sociology, the differences were even clearer: they were 'abstracted empiricists'. Most of us, they insisted, were not sociologists at all but pseudophilosophers, proponents of this or that obscurantist methodology. Then, at some point, it came to be thought that we were dealing with 'incommensurable' paradigms and, for more than a decade, Marxism and 'bourgeois' social science contended on this understanding. However, by the late 1970s, what was ostensibly incommensurable had already been compared. In economics, thanks in part to Roemer's own reconstructions,[8] it became clear that the difference between Marxist positions and neoclassical ones were in fact resolvable, and not unequivocally in favor of the Marxist side. Marxist positions were intelligible, though often cumbersome and sometimes untenable. Class analysis could contribute to sociology, but it was, at most, a distinct field within the broader discipline, not a new methodology. Thus Marxist social science too was collapsing into theirs. Just as everybody once knew what socialism was, everybody used to know what a Marxist was. Today it is far from clear.

There is yet another consequence of the analytical turn in Marxist theory that bears importantly on the concept of socialism. No doubt, Marx did hold something like the theory of history reconstructed and defended by Cohen in *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, the book that gave analytical Marxism its feet.[9] In any case, it was a version of this theory that became canonical for Marxists, after the founding of the Second International, with implications for the broader intellectual culture (as Schumpeter observed). In particular, the theory's concepts of capitalism and socialism (or post-capitalism) helped shape received understandings of private and public property. Even orthodox Marxists knew this was not the whole story. In retrospect, they did not have much useful to say about socialism (or post-capitalism). But they did at least keep alive Marx's conviction that history finally ends with communism – a society that transcends the form of community endemic to societies organized through commodity production. Cohen's work, because it succeeded so brilliantly in its own domain, helped to blind many of us to the possibility of a communist future. By focussing so enthusiastically on Marx's theory of history's structure and direction, a theory that ends, as it were, with capitalism's demise, we lost sight of the end of history itself. In effect, a part of Marx's account of capitalism's future, the part that involves the end of private property in external means of production, came to stand in for the whole story. Thus the very idea of communism lapsed.

In taking historical materialism on board as we did, we effectively broke with our 'erstwhile philosophical consciousness', following the more worthy precedent of Marx himself in *The German Ideology*. The Marxisms we knew first, whether neo-Hegelian, existentialist or structuralist, evinced a deep, though seldom acknowledged, hostility to historical materialism. Whatever complicated (and unformed) relations we had with one or another aspect of these diverse strains of theorizing, most of us, I think, shared this hostility. But, by the end of the 1970s, these European imports were increasingly overtaken by events and overcome by internal exhaustion. 'Western Marxism' was fast becoming as 'academic' as analytical Marxism always was. As such, much of it stood revealed as obscurantist posturing. But in its place, after Cohen, there was at hand a defensible (or at least plausible) account of history's structure and direction that connected us to Marxism's (pre-Bolshevik) Golden Age, a theory in which private and non-private (public) property played a decisive role, but in which communism played virtually no role at all.

The development of analytical Marxism, after Cohen, severed even this connection to traditional socialism. It is worth remembering how Roemer once joined his work on exploitation with historical materialism.[10] The epochal historical divisions historical materialism identified were marked by the progressive elimination of historically specific forms of exploitation or, what came to the same thing, by successive deprivatizations of real property relations (first in other persons, then in alienable means of production). When it still seemed that exploitation mattered, movement along the historical materialist trajectory could therefore be regarded as morally progressive. At each stage along the way, there were qualitatively fewer forms of exploitation remaining. So long as what remained did not, as it were, rise up to fill the void, we could infer that there was less exploitation overall. Since we were all critical in varying degrees of 'actually existing socialism', we concluded that post-capitalist 'status exploitation' had more than taken up the space left vacant by the elimination of capitalist exploitation. But we remained confident that socialism could be, and 'normally' was, normatively superior to capitalism, even if the balance sheet between existing socialisms and existing capitalisms tipped in the other direction.

In time, Roemer came to regard even this conviction as problematic. With historical materialism 'reconsidered' almost to oblivion and the normative force of exploitation demolished, there were no longer distinctively Marxist grounds for preferring socialism to capitalism. If socialism is superior to capitalism, therefore, it can only be because it

can be expected to get what liberals want better than capitalism can. In retrospect, the picture of socialism implicit in *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* was the last gasp, from an analytical Marxist vantage point, of the old, formerly secure understandings. This is not the place for me to explain why I think the old Roemer was more on track than the new. But even those of us who resist following Roemer into the liberal camp must concede that the special purchase we thought we had qua Marxists on the future of socialism is anything but secure. Unless, of course, we bring communism back in.

What Do Socialists Really Want?

Roemer's position, again, is that equality (or rather equality of opportunity) for self-realization and welfare, for political influence and for social status is what socialists have always wanted. Socialists therefore wanted socialism, deprivatization or socialization of the principal means of production, only as a means to these ends. Now it would indeed be odd and arguably even unreasonable to want a form of property relations for its own sake. Thus it must be true that socialists never cared about socialism per se; that socialists were socialists because of what they believed about socialism's effects on what they did care about intrinsically. Roemer claims that what socialists have always cared about intrinsically is equality; therefore, socialists are egalitarians, not more, not less.

Needless to say, we could press a similar claim against equality itself. Why, after all, should we care about the equal distribution of this or that distribuand for its own sake? An up-to-date response, owing to the latest turn in Rawls's work, is that we want equality for the sake of 'social unity'.[11] But this justification is, I would hope, too liberal for anyone who identifies with socialist politics to abide, even one who believes that socialists and liberals ultimately want the same thing. For, however much times may have changed, it is surely still the case that to identify with the socialist tradition politically is to endorse a style of politics that aims at changing the world radically, indeed at revolutionizing it. On the other hand, Rawls's emphasis on consensus suggests, even if it does not strictly imply, a politics of continuity with existing arrangements; a suggestion corroborated by the celebration of American constitutional principles that pervades his recent writings. In any case, it would be profoundly ahistorical to imagine the institutional reforms Roemer proposes installed by ordinary constitutional means. Because they are so radical, they

would almost certainly require something very like a social revolution to put in place. If only to maintain consistency therefore between politics and political philosophy, it will be better to take recourse in the more standard view (since Kant), according to which equality (of the right distribuand) implements 'impartiality' or equal respect for persons which is, in turn, intrinsic to morality. The question, 'Why equality?', therefore devolves into deep but familiar questions about the moral order, and becomes tractable to the degree that fundamental moral philosophical issues can be satisfactorily resolved. However, at this point we might wonder how deep justifications must go before we can give a satisfactory accounting of what socialists want. Whatever we make of his politics, there is surely something right-headed in Rawls's insistence that political philosophy be political, not metaphysical. I suggest we take Rawls at his word in this regard and also, at the risk of appearing disingenuous, that we appropriate (or misappropriate) an aspect of Roemer's account of what egalitarians (and therefore socialists) want, the better to reflect politically on what socialists really want.

In other forums, it would be appropriate to take issue with Roemer's intervention into the 'equality of what?' debate, but not here. For one thing, the remarks in the first chapter of *A Future for Socialism* are only stage-setting for the reflections on institutional arrangements that follow. For another, the position he endorses is more or less a composite of the most sensible things others have said. I will therefore only register the view that I am dubious of the scheme to fuse welfarist and perfectionist concerns, as Roemer does when he claims that socialists want equal opportunity for self-realization and welfare. I would also question the claim that egalitarians need always be proponents of equal opportunity in contrast to straight equality. But I shall not pursue these objections. I shall instead reflect in a non-Roemerian spirit on the third of the distribuands Roemer claims socialists want equally distributed: social status.

Equality of social status could mean just equality of citizenship: (formal) equality before the law, one person one vote, and so on. Socialists have always been partisans of equality in this sense (albeit with some reservations about the rights of former exploiters in post-revolutionary societies) but so has virtually everyone since the French Revolution. It was, in fact, this idea of 'political emancipation' that Marx criticized incisively, not to deny its merits but to reveal its limitations, in his early writings. It is therefore true but uninformative to say that socialists want equality of social status in this sense. At the other extreme, equality of social status might mean the end of 'status

exploitation' as Roemer conceived it, an end to individuals' rights to benefit differentially from the incumbency of positions in hierarchically structured institutions.[12] Even more radically it might mean the end of hierarchy itself. The abolition of hierarchy as such is plainly utopian, as even Marx would probably have acknowledged.[13] Marx himself seems to have regarded the abolition of status exploitation as a utopian aspiration too; in any case, he relegated far-reaching measures aimed at advancing toward this goal to the remotest communist future. Roemer accordingly maintained that status exploitation (along with skills exploitation) survives the transition from capitalism to socialism, that is, to the early, 'transitional' phases of history's final 'mode of production'. It is only with the greatest hesitation, therefore, that even the Roemer of a decade ago could have maintained that socialists want the end of status exploitation. This leaves a third sense of status equality to be teased out, not too disingenuously, from some of Roemer's remarks on status equality. On this understanding, what socialists want (in addition to formal political equality) is the end of one kind of status inequality, the kind that follows from class divisions. In other words, what socialists want is a classless society, a society that does not sort individuals into social class (even if it does allow individuals to benefit differentially from the incumbency of positions in hierarchically structured organizations). This understanding of status equality points us back to communism. For a necessary condition for general will coordination of individuals' behaviors is the absence of systemic social divisions of a sort that render a real consensus on ends unachievable. Marx plainly thought that class divisions were the deepest and most salient obstacles in the way of communist community. In his view, the end of class society was certainly a necessary condition for communism. Indeed, a reader of Marx's more exuberant political writings, *The Communist Manifesto* for example, might conclude that Marx thought it a sufficient condition as well. This is not the place to examine further the connection between classlessness and communism. It is enough to note that classlessness can fairly serve as a proxy for communism. Thus there is a sense in which even some of Roemer's own reflections on what socialists want can be enlisted in support of my contrary contention.

Again, I am attaching meanings to Roemer's remarks on status equality that he almost certainly did not intend. *A Future for Socialism* ignores communism. It even relegates its proposed successor, the full realization of liberal equality, to an indefinite future that socialists need not dwell upon as they concoct schemes for reforming existing institutions. It is tempting to accede to this advice. In dark moments,

it does seem dangerously rigid and anachronistic to retain faith in a future so remote and so out of line with current thinking. But I would insist nevertheless that the current crisis of socialist theory and practice can be satisfactorily addressed only if we resist this temptation and resolutely bring communism back in.

Why Communism Matters

Like Roemer's assertion that socialists want what liberal egalitarians want, the claim that socialists want communism is, in part, a historical observation and, in part, a political recommendation. Since the issue is socialism's future, not just its past, the repertorial and political aspects of these competing claims overlap. What is in contention is the legacy of the socialist tradition and its (possible) futures.

Were communism an impossibly utopian aspiration or, worse still, an incoherent ideal, the heirs of the socialist tradition ought indeed to abandon it. Liberal equality would then be a suitable, second-best goal. Whether or not socialists or their heirs should remain socialists, whether they should continue to seek the socialization of property rights in (important) means of production, would then depend solely on socialism's efficacy and feasibility for implementing liberal objectives. Thus there is a sense in which, on Roemer's view, what distinguished socialists from other liberals historically was only their view about the consequences for equality of socializing property relations. Again, I think this way of looking at the matter is wrong-headed. Socialists have always wanted more than equality. But if communism is not a viable ideal, then perhaps liberal egalitarianism is indeed all that can be retrieved from the socialist tradition. Roemer's concern in *A Future for Socialism* is to defend this much of the old ideal against strategies for the Left that are not socialist at all. In contrast, I am suggesting that even in the present political conjuncture the heirs of the socialist tradition would be well advised to declare themselves unabashedly its continuators.

Nowadays, the consensus view about what is utopian stops far short of communism. It stops virtually at the systems in place in the Western democracies. Thus Adam Przeworski has suggested that 'what died in Eastern Europe is the very idea of rationally administering things to satisfy human needs'.[14] This assessment was made in sadness. Throughout our intellectual and political culture, a similar judgment is celebrated. Everywhere, we are told that attempts at rationalizing economic and social affairs directly are bound to fail, and that the

consequences of trying are almost always disastrous. Some on the right maintain that individual optimizing is all the rationality we need or can (safely) obtain. Accordingly, they would have us rely on market mechanisms exclusively and forever. Liberals counter by identifying market incompetencies and arguing for public-sector remedies. Who cannot be affected by this revolution of diminishing expectations! In a world in which even the affirmative state liberalism we all used to deride has come to seem impossibly left-wing, communism is off the political agenda altogether.

I would once again assert that communism is materially possible, humanly desirable and consistent with real-world historical tendencies.[15] Of course, communism is not likely to be on the immediate political horizon any time soon, a fate it shares with Roemer's proposals. In any case, this is not the place to marshall arguments in defense of communism if only because they are orthogonal to the 'short-run' focus of *A Future for Socialism*. I would, however, venture some thoughts on why such a very long-range and ostensibly 'unrealistic' goal matters, even in the time frame that is Roemer's principal concern.

First, communism matters politically because without it left politics risks devolving into a motley of good causes, void of any guiding vision. What we have without communism is what we have increasingly on the Left today: liberalism with a vengeance. Even when it is motivated expressly by egalitarian aspirations, as liberal politics seldom has been, the liberal style is to muddle through, to identify issues and contrive policies to address them but not to seek to implement a vision of a qualitatively different and better social order, except as one might emerge as an unintended consequence of cumulative, small-scale improvements. Liberal politics is a politics bereft of overarching purpose. Indeed, for so-called 'political liberals', the absence of a purpose is liberalism's defining characteristic and principal virtue.[16] Without communism or some functionally equivalent end in view, liberal politics would win by default, and the Left would have no genuine alternative around which to mobilize opposition to existing institutional arrangements. It would devolve instead into what it is already fast becoming: a collection of aimless do-gooders.

A Future for Socialism stands in a contradictory relation to this prospect. On the one hand, it expressly endorses liberal political philosophy; thus it evinces an affinity with liberal politics. At the same time, it proposes reforms of prevailing property relations too far-reaching for any imaginable liberal politics to sustain. This is why Roemer's proposals, despite their official modesty, have a utopian

flavor. Paradoxically, the way to a greater 'realism' is to abandon the attempt at moderation. A more equal distribution of resources is part of what socialists want. But the main thing is to transform human life qualitatively; above all, in its communal dimensions. The end of (big-C) Communism is hardly an occasion for abandoning this goal. In time, it may even prove instrumental for its resurrection. If only as a focus for discussion, the prescriptions advanced in *A Future for Socialism* can help to promote a renaissance of socialist theory. More importantly, since efficiency does matter, Roemer's design for society may well find a place in the socialist polities of the future. But there will be no future for socialism if socialism's objectives are set aside. For there would then be no idea capable of mobilizing the political support necessary for breaking away from received practices and institutions. For *A Future for Socialism* to be part of socialism's future, it is crucial that its radicalness not be diluted by liberal politics but instead be unequivocally embraced.

The possibility that Roemer's prescriptions may be integral to the socialism of the future suggests yet another reason for bringing communism back in. Whoever wants to transcend market society, even if only as a distant goal, must look to the consequences of social institutions on individuals' characters; for institutions, whatever else they may be, are always also educators. Market socialists therefore need to correct for the educative consequences of the market mechanisms on which they rely. A deep ideological commitment to the longstanding objectives of socialist politics can provide a corrective. Indeed, there may be no other way to prevent an economic system with market mechanisms from developing into a full-fledged market society, the antithesis of what socialists want. Even if Roemer is right to insist that, for the foreseeable future, socialists must accede to the incentive structure capitalism has generated, their paramount task is to discourage the indefinite prolongation of market mentalities, the raw material out of which market societies are built. Without the idea of communism, they are disarmed from doing so. What socialists want would therefore remain forever elusive.

Socialism versus *A Future for Socialism*

Because communism is so undertheorized in the Marxist tradition, it is not at all clear how to identify advances towards it. But there are difficulties too in identifying progress towards the realization of liberal egalitarian objectives. To gain a deeper, political understanding of *A*

Future for Socialism, it will be helpful to reflect on the implications of some of these difficulties. It will emerge that Roemer's market socialism, insofar as it is only a means for obtaining what liberal egalitarians want, is almost certainly a poor substitute for social democracy, a prospect that bodes ill for its role in reviving socialism's future. This consideration adds further support to the contention that *A Future for Socialism* can be part of socialism's future only if its institutional recommendations are liberated from the liberal egalitarian profession of faith in which they are presently framed.

How are we to know if we have moved forward in implementing what liberal egalitarians want? For now, let us assume away vexing and possibly unsolvable problems in the way of combining the egalitarian distribuands Roemer lists. Imagine, for example, that we can say in a principled way that this much loss in opportunities for welfare and that much gain in equality of political influence represents an overall gain (or loss) for equality. There is still the problem that, for these distribuands, all but very gross changes are difficult, if not impossible, to detect. Social status (with its attendant ambiguities) apart, we do not have good cognitive access to welfare levels, to opportunities for self-realization or to political influence. This is why throughout the 'equality of what?' debate, whenever questions of practical implementation arise, the recourse is always to proxies for one or another egalitarian distribuand (or collection of distribuands). Thus it is fair to observe, even as 'the equality of what?' debate continues to unfold, that in practice liberal egalitarians all want the same thing: equality of income and wealth.

To the extent that this proxy is reliable, we can tell when we are headed in the right direction. This is why it is reasonable to expect that the transformed stock market Roemer envisions would enhance equality. A Roemerian coupon economy would diminish inequalities of wealth (assuming no new mechanisms for generating wealth inequalities take the place of the one that is eliminated) and therefore significantly diminish inequalities of income based on inequalities of wealth.[17] But, if the point is only to equalize incomes, 'social democratic' redistributive taxation and national (or international) wage policies would be at least as efficacious as the alterations in property rights that Roemer proposes.

Roemer does advocate joining social democratic measures wherever possible to his proposals for transforming property rights. But we might wonder why, insofar as he is only intent on equalizing income and wealth, Roemer is not a social democrat *tout court*. There are two answers that can be gleaned from *A Future for Socialism*. Neither is

satisfactory, but the less unsatisfactory answer at least suggests the understanding of status equality that rejoins Roemer's institutional prescriptions with genuinely socialist aims.

The more unsatisfactory answer is that, as the world economic system has developed, further advances in social democracy have become politically unfeasible, even in those parts of the world where social democracy has, to date, advanced the farthest. But, as I have already suggested, feasibility is hardly the strong suit of Roemer's own proposals. Insofar as it is intended as a political intervention, *A Future for Socialism* is addressed mainly to the Left of the former Second World. But, as such, it is suspended in that brief interval between the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' and the headlong rush of formerly socialist countries to imitate, with truly horrendous consequences, the worst features of existing capitalist societies. Perhaps for a few months the constraints on historical agency in Eastern Europe were less overbearing than such constraints typically are. But that moment has definitively passed. Roemer also suggests that his proposals may be feasible somewhere in the Third World, perhaps in Brazil. This is equally doubtful. Thus, even if his gloomy prognostications for social democracy are sound, a social democrat could fairly reply *tu quoque* to Roemer's complaint. A social democrat could also point out that social democracy has a long record of working well in many historical contexts, while Roemer's version of market socialism has no record at all.

However, Roemer does have another reason for not proposing a strictly social democratic strategy for the Left. From its inception, social democracy has been based on a class compromise that effectively disarmed workers from challenging the profit positions and power of the capitalist class. Roemer's coupon economy, on the other hand, eliminates Big Capital at the outset. It goes without saying that socialists have always been anti-capitalists. But having (justifiably) blurred the distinction between socialism and capitalism, Roemer cannot simply assume that socialists want Big Capital gone, even for instrumental reasons. Ingeniously, however, he does provide a way to retrieve this aspect of historical socialism: he demonstrates that capitalist power, if not capitalism itself, should be diminished in order to lessen the incentives capitalists have to generate public bads. However, in this respect too we are entitled to wonder why social democracy is not enough. All social democrats favor social democratic measures for their ameliorative effects. But left-wing social democrats have also defended social democracy for its likely consequences in altering the balance of power between capital and labor, to a point

where a peaceful transition beyond capitalist domination, a self-liquidation of Big Capital, comes on to the political agenda. This objective does not quite connect social democracy to socialism in the Marxist sense, but it does make social democracy at least tendentially anti-capitalist. Left-wing social democrats distanced themselves from Marxist socialism for reasons different from those that motivate Roemer's rethinking of socialism's future. But it is far from clear that the futures they envisioned are in any significant respects different from the future implicit in Roemer's design for society.

Were I persuaded that we must abandon the kind of socialism that aims at communism, I would question the need to stray from social democracy's tried and true (though admittedly problematic) path. I would even be tempted to turn against Roemer's own proposals the 'conservative' rationale that Roemer himself invokes to rebut critics from the Left: that the more untried and radical the proposed changes, the less feasible they are and the less likely they are to succeed. But of course I am not persuaded that the old socialist ideal is finished. Roemer defends his proposals, not always compellingly, against latter-day social democrats (like Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers, Fred Block and others) who are even more 'moderate' than he declares himself to be. Political feasibility is the pivot of their disputes. But, in this case as in so many others, the best defense is a good offense. Insofar as the issue is not what is now on the political agenda but what kind of political agenda we can and should create, there is no 'pragmatic' reason to forbear from the vigorous pursuit of genuinely socialist aspirations: for a future free from systemic class oppression, where genuine liberty and equality are achieved in conditions of real community ('fraternity'); where, as *The Communist Manifesto* famously maintains 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all'.

I leave it to others to refine Roemer's institutional recommendations. Allowing that his scheme or some emendation of it is cogent and workable, there is little doubt that it would represent an improvement over the status quo. But from the vantage point I think socialists ought to adopt, institutional changes should be assessed not just for their ameliorative consequences but also, mainly, for their long-run dynamic implications, for their efficacy in moving humankind toward a communist future. My worry is that erstwhile socialists will be tempted to mobilize behind a program that collapses socialism into (left) liberal politics, just as Roemer would officially collapse socialist (normative) theory into liberal egalitarianism. It may be wise in the present conjuncture for socialists to advance only minimal agendas.

But all reforms relevant to socialism's future, including the ones Roemer proposes, should be assessed in the light of communism, not just in comparison to existing capitalism. We socialists must never lose sight of where we want to go. If we are to revive and continue the socialist tradition, we must not do what *A Future for Socialism*, in its zeal to save socialism, comes perilously close to doing: we must not abandon socialism in order to save it.

Notes

1. John E. Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1994.
2. See, among many others, Amartya Sen, 'Equality of What?' in S. M. McMurrin, ed., *The Tannner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 1, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press and Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1980, and *Inequality Reexamined*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1992; Ronald Dworkin, 'What Is Equality? Part 1: Equality of Welfare', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981), pp. 283–345, and 'What is Equality? Part 2 Equality of Resources', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981), pp. 655–69; Richard Arneson, 'Equality and Equality of Opportunity for Welfare', *Philosophical Review* 56 (1989), pp. 77–93; and G. A. Cohen, 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', *Ethics* 99 (1990), pp. 906–44.
3. Needless to say, throughout what follows, (small-c) communism should not be confused with (big-C) Communism, the economic, social and political system formerly in place in the erstwhile Soviet Union and elsewhere.
4. I elaborate upon and defend the claims advanced in this paragraph in Andrew Levine, *The General Will: Rousseau, Marx, Communism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993.
5. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, Democracy*, New York: Harper and Row 1942.
6. As we shall see, it is always possible in principle to achieve similar and even more radically egalitarian distributional outcomes by keeping private property intact and redistributing revenues collected through taxes. Thus, in Roemer's view, it is not distributional outcomes per se that matter for defining socialism, but rather property relations.
7. Cf. John E. Roemer, 'Should Marxists Be Interested in Exploitation?', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (1985), pp. 30–65, and *Free to Lose*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1988.
8. John E. Roemer, *Analytical Foundations of Marxian Economic Theory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1981.
9. G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, Oxford: Oxford University Press and Princeton: Princeton University Press 1978.
10. John E. Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* and 'New Directions in the Marxian Theory of Exploitation and Class', *Politics and Society* 11 (1982), pp. 253–87; reprinted in John Roemer, ed., *Analytical Marxism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986, pp. 81–113.
11. See especially John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press 1993.
12. Cf. J. Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class*.
13. There is, to be sure, Marx's celebrated vision of people hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon and criticizing at night (without being hunters, fishermen or critical critics). But the examples Marx chooses leave the interpretation of this picture indeterminate. The most charitable construal of what Marx had in mind is a world in which individuals pass effortlessly from one position to another. It is of course compatible with this (dubious) idea that positions in complex organizations continue to be hierarchically structured.

14. Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, p. 7.
15. I elaborate upon and defend these claims in Levine, *The General Will*.
16. Cf., among many others, Bruce Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1980, 'Political Liberalisms', *The Journal of Philosophy* vol. xci (1994), pp. 364–86; and John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*.
17. However, if we are to achieve economic well-being as well as greater equality from Roemer's reforms, we must acknowledge what Roemer does not expressly admit: that this equalizing mechanism must be held in bounds. Roemer cannot allow income inequalities generated through stock ownership to diminish very far. Coupon holders have to care about their dividend incomes if they are to serve their appointed role in promoting the efficiency of firms. But they won't care enough, given what Roemer assumes about human nature, unless dividend incomes are high enough to make a significant difference in their lives.