

## DISCUSSION

# CAPITALISM, STATE BUREAUCRATIC SOCIALISM AND FREEDOM

### I

Andrew Levine notes in his *Arguing For Socialism* that “actually existing socialism is capitalism’s best argument in defense of itself.”<sup>1</sup> Political liberties particularly have fared badly in actually existing socialisms and this has tended, to understate it, to undermine freedom in those societies. So what can be said on behalf of socialism in general does not unequivocally carry over into at least all forms of bureaucratic state socialism. Indeed it may not carry over into any form of bureaucratic state socialism and, models apart, existing socialisms have tended to be of that form. The interesting question is whether the lack of respect for political liberties is rooted in something structural such that it is endemic to the very idea of bureaucratic state socialism, or whether it results from the accidental historical circumstances of, say, the way these societies — the Soviet Union is paradigmatic — have developed. I have in mind, in thinking here of the Soviet Union, its industrial backwardness and poverty, its lack of a parliamentary tradition and its not having gone through a capitalist phase in which it came to have a developed capitalist mode of production. Also relevant is the fact of its being surrounded and having been twice invaded by implacable capitalist foes. Is it these historically contingent things or at least some of them that lead to a lack of a sense of the importance of political liberties or does it result from something systematic that just goes with the very model of bureaucratic state socialism? Or is it still something different that is the main causal factor?

Let us first consider the argument that it is features which are structural to bureaucratic state socialism that are the primary cause of the lack of respect for political liberties. Levine points out firstly that most, if not all, existing socialisms have become bureaucratic state socialisms. In these actually existing socialisms, state bureaucratic domination, not popular democratic control, replaces the domination of

capital. (43) In these societies there is no control and indeed little say from below by workers. In bureaucratic state socialism, even more than in monopoly capitalism, power is inordinately concentrated. (44) Levine puts the case for capitalism, even organized monopoly capitalism, against bureaucratic state socialism as follows:

We have already seen how, under capitalism, there is bound to be some civil society, some sphere where political interference can never be rightful. Thus power will always be at least somewhat diffuse: first, because independent capitalist enterprises, competing capitals, constitute independent centers of power; and second, because the state exists as an institutional apparatus or set of apparatuses distinct from any particular concentrations of capital and from the capitalist class as a whole. Independent capitals and the state therefore act as countervailing powers. In particular circumstances, of course, these powers may not be very independent. There may be enormous concentrations of capital (monopolies, cartels) that centralize power. Or the state may be instrumentally linked to particular capitalist interests or to the capitalist class as a whole, serving directly, as *The Communist Manifesto* would have it, as its “executive committee.” Still, under capitalism, there is always at least the juridical possibility of establishing independent enterprises. At the limit, a limit that has never been even remotely approximated for any time in any geographically significant territory, there might be a unique, capitalist employer. But even were this the case, there is solace in the fact that this circumstance could never be fixed permanently — for capitalism requires freedom of contract and therefore, in principle, free ingress to capitalist markets. A unique employer would always find its monopoly position jeopardized. And there would still be a formally independent state. No matter how subordinate to the capitalist class the state might become, and no matter how many economic functions it might assume, it must remain institutionally separate from capital. The state could not entirely assume the capitalists’ role, and the system remain capitalist — for capitalism is defined by *private*, not public, control over productive capacities; and state control, so long as it is not merely a juridical fiction, is a form of public control. Countervailing power is intrinsic to capitalist, but not socialist, political economies. (44)<sup>2</sup>

Though it is very likely to be much less so than capitalist ideology gives to understand, as the above quotation from Levine indicates, it is true that there are some countervailing powers in capitalism, and countervailing powers, even though sometimes rather weakly, promote freedom. (45) Still wherever power is concentrated individuals find themselves at the mercy of the powers that be. This is a commonplace but an important one nevertheless. At the limit, where there is only “one employer, to run afoul of that employer would be to incur trouble indeed; worse trouble by far than where effective power is less concentrated.” (45)<sup>3</sup> Countervailing powers are, it should be said, hedges against tyranny. Capitalism may not provide much of a hedge, particu-

larly if there is a tendency, as there seems at least to be, for capital to concentrate and, in important respects, to dominate the state; but some resistance to tyranny is built into the capitalist system in virtue of the 'space' capitalism provides for civil society." (45) In bureaucratic socialism we have a situation where the state is the sole employer. "Economic and political power," as Levine puts it, "are concentrated in a single institutional nexus." (45) That is hardly conducive to freedom and autonomy.

Levine concedes that in principle state bureaucratic socialism could by the use of law construct something like a Bill of Rights to correct the likely effects of enormous concentrations of power. Moreover, the legal documents — the Constitution and the like — of the Soviet Union, to take the prime example, at least sound perfectly acceptable. But nowhere is what is promised in the constitutions a reality in existing socialisms. What is absent is any very scrupulous concern for political liberties, civil liberties and human rights. But then we are thrown back to a question that Levine's argument was designed to answer. Is this due to structures endemic to bureaucratic state socialism or is it due to distinctive historical features about the conditions under which those societies came into existence? Levine's above remarks do nothing to help us answer that. Here we need to avoid reifying remarks about the state and to look carefully, with attention to detail and context, at how these institutions actually work. At the level of abstraction at which Levine works little can be said. Indeed his weakness here may be just endemic to taking a philosophical approach to such matters. There is just so much that argument, conceptual analysis and a careful philosophical sorting out can do.<sup>4</sup>

## II

As far as formal structures are concerned, bureaucratic state socialism, even more than monopoly capitalism, has "political and economic power inextricably joined," but, that notwithstanding, in reality this can be very much the case in monopoly capitalism too. The independence of the state, as Marxists have repeatedly argued, can be pretty much a legal fiction.<sup>5</sup>

Levine might reply that legally speaking there has to be this private

sphere in any capitalist society (even in Nazi Germany), but it is this private sphere which provides at least the possibility of countervailing forces. But there are no such formal structures that could serve as countervailing forces, Levine claims, in bureaucratic state socialism. But this, even if true, I would argue, must in turn, be counterbalanced against the fact that the two economies have different rationales: one produces to amass profit, to make capital accumulation, the other produces to satisfy needs.<sup>6</sup> The former has a built-in structural need to exploit while the latter does not. Both have different structures that could pander to domination: in capitalism it is the control of labour power in search of profits; in bureaucratic state socialism it is by having no private sphere which serves as a countervailing force to the State which commands the economy. Which of these is more likely to give rise to the more extensive domination? What is to be said here needs to be argued out in detail and concretely with a wealth of historical and social data. Again high levels of abstraction and conceptual analysis will not take us very far.

We have very centrally the above question, but we also are still faced with the related though distinct question of whether it is structural features or the historically specific features of existing socialisms which are the principal causes of their bad record with respect to civil and political liberties and with respect to human rights. Levine, as far as I can see, has not resolved that issue. I think proceeding here at a high level of political abstraction is not going to get us very far. Levine is doing here what a philosopher is good at, namely posing these questions at a high level of abstraction and then drawing distinctions to aid in clarification; but once the questions have been rightly posed we need detailed studies of what actually existing societies, capitalist and socialist, are really like, and we need very crucially to see what such a state bureaucratic society would be like when it was (a) a society that arose from an advanced capitalist society of considerable wealth with a long tradition of parliamentary democracy, and (b) when the state in that society was not, as say the GDR, a client state of another more powerful state which did not meet those conditions. I expect that more than philosophical speculation or analysis a good understanding of history and of the political and economic realities of contemporary societies will be what really counts here.

## III

Like G. A. Cohen, Levine notes that defenders of capitalism have made “much of the fact that political liberties have grown up under capitalism and, in some cases at least, have flourished under it.” (46) This historical correlation holds and it is implausible to believe that it is just a coincidence. Clearly there is something here that needs to be accounted for.

The usual assumption in these contexts is that the emergence of capitalism brought these political liberties into being and into stable and widely accepted existence. But perhaps it was the existence of these political liberties that actually helped capitalism to emerge and flourish? Or, alternatively, there might be a complex causal interaction here without the primacy going either way. It is not clear here how the causal relations go.

However, as Levine is quick to point out, even if capitalism is responsible for the coming to be of these liberties and for supporting and sustaining them, it would not follow “that capitalism is necessary for their continuation or development.” (47) Levine states succinctly what he takes it that we should conclude here.

At most, it would follow that, under the particular historical conditions of late feudal Europe, emerging capitalism contributed to the rise of political liberalism. Such a conclusion would be of some historical interest, certainly, but its relevance for political philosophy — and particularly for assessing the relative merits of socialism and capitalism — would be slight at best. It certainly would not follow that political liberties can survive and flourish only under capitalism. Nor even would it follow that these freedoms can only come into being under capitalism. In short, there is no reason to conclude anything at all about the importance of capitalism for political freedoms, even if the most defensible historical argument is the one pro-capitalists profer. (47)

Moreover, and vitally, for a fair analysis, we should not view things about capitalism’s record on protecting civil liberties from the exclusive viewpoint of present-day Western Europe and North America. Levine reminds us of some salient facts that liberals are prone to ignore, namely that

It is worth remembering too that while the record of some existing capitalist countries on political liberties is good, capitalism’s overall record is not at all uniformly impressive. Nazi Germany was a capitalist society and so are all the fascist and comprador

regimes outside the Soviet and Chinese spheres of influence that have terrorized their populations and undone the freedoms of their peoples. It is worth remembering too that many of these regimes were put in place and sustained by the most liberal of the capitalist countries — by Great Britain, France and, particularly in the past four decades, by the United States. From that perspective, capitalism's record on political liberties appears much less sound than it might if one looked just at Britain, France or the United States themselves. (47)<sup>7</sup>

In this context we should also bear in mind that in “many capitalist countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, the record on political liberties is easily as dismal as anywhere in the Soviet bloc.” (47) So we see, to crystallize this, that both capitalism and state bureaucratic socialism are “susceptible to despotic political administration.” (48)

The countervailing economic powers possessed by capitalism that Levine mentioned initially do not in fact seem to help very much. They do not seem in practice to be very effective in checking domination and despotism. “What will protect liberty,” Levine argues, “is appropriate *political* institutions and a vigilant citizenry, not capitalism. The fate of political liberties under socialism and capitalism depends mainly, it seems, on *political will*, not on the political economic organization of society.” (48)

Looking at actually existing socialisms and actually existing capitalisms, we are justified in concluding that even “with respect to political liberties, there are no grounds for deciding for or against socialism (including state bureaucratic socialism) or capitalism on the basis of the historical record.” (48) The actual historical record of both of these socio-economic systems has been horrendous but when, standing back from the historical record, we look at either capitalism or state bureaucratic socialism generally as a model of society with respect only to freedom, we find, Levine claims, that it is anything but clear how we should go in making comparative judgments. There are things in both that are hostile to autonomy, and to democracy as well, and it is difficult to decide which, everything considered, is worse, with respect to freedom, though *democratic* socialism clearly comes out better than both bureaucratic state socialism and capitalism. (49) What is troublesome about democratic socialism is that we do not know if it could become a social reality. The thing, of course, is to show that democratic socialism is *historically feasible*. (49) So far it is an ideal that has remained in the heads and hearts of socialists. The real test for its

historical feasibility will come when, of course, (if indeed that ever happens) advanced capitalist societies with long parliamentary traditions move to socialism.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Levine, *Arguing For Socialism* (London, England: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984). Future references to *Arguing For Socialism* will be given in the text.

<sup>2</sup> But if it *really* is *public* control, as Levine insists in his very definition of socialism, then this implies many people and right there there are countervailing forces.

<sup>3</sup> Does this reify the State?

<sup>4</sup> Levine, at other points in his analysis, is very aware of these limitations.

<sup>5</sup> Ralph Miliband, *Marxism and Politics*.

<sup>6</sup> This may be too 'idealistic' a picture if Agnes Heller *et al.* are right about the actual nature of these societies. See Agnes Heller *et al.* (eds.), *Dictatorship Over Needs*.

<sup>7</sup> Noam Chomsky in book after book in the past thirty years has brought this vividly to our attention.

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