

New Times

# Vorsprung Durch Rethink

Doesn't New Times require a new politics? Doesn't it mean going beyond the traditional socialist project? Goran Therborn argues for a life-chance politics which marks a break with much conventional socialist thought



**'I am assuming no change in the everyday mixture of good and evil in Mr Smith or Ms Jones'**



Three concepts are sufficient to sum up a long-term socialist or, if you prefer, radical-humanist project: human life-realisation, universality, and history. Universal human life-realisation is, in a nutshell, what socialism is about, with the addition that it has a location and a range in historical time. It is not a moment, or even a lifetime, of bliss only, but a period rooted in the past and connecting itself with the future.

A *vision* of it may be seen as the outside of a sphere, with open horizons in every direction, some spaces in varying shades of daylight with people peacefully and autonomously going about myriad activities, difficult to distinguish between work or play, not to speak of between rewarding and bare subsistence-yielding activities. Some people are acting alone, others in smaller or larger groups, leaders and led may exist, but are impossible to distinguish from afar. Locales vary seemingly infinitely, but slums, rural holes of misery or concentration camps are nowhere to be seen. A certain clean freshness is hanging in the air and sparkles in the water. Other spaces are in the dark but penetrable to the visionary, who sees well-fed people in safe, well-sheltered sleep, people in the passion of love-making, individuals awake with sleepless eyes wrestling with the demons of creation, or others being born, lying sick or dying, with caring fellow-humans at their bedside. The visionary is looking at Earth from inner space and sees a multi-faceted

human life without systematic violence, coercion, misery, and degradation, without sorting mechanisms condemning categories of human beings to having a large portion of their children die as babies, falling prey to famines, preventable diseases, poverty, humiliation, exploitation, lack of care, and to a cruel or unnecessary death.

As this vision is meant to be part of a rational political discourse, it is open to a number of objections. In other words, in forwarding a planetary vision of humanity in daylight and at night, I accept the obligation of a rational reasoner to provide reasons for sceptics to see it as a possible future, and as a future worth striving for. Indeed, I am trying to develop an argument in dialogue with critics.

## **A Debate With A Liberal Sceptic And A Modern Socialist**

### **Round One: About Evil And Emancipation**

**Liberal Sceptic** Your so-called socialist vision is little more than a dream of a world without evil. That may be a noble dream, but it provides no indications of how to get there. And, after all, is it worthy of a rational social scientist (politician, writer, activist, citizen - delete what is not appropriate) to promise a world without evil?

**Modern Socialist** On this point, if only on this, I agree completely with my liberal enemy, but I would add...

**Answer** Wait a minute, let us stop here for a moment. My vision is

something significantly different from, or less than, a wish for a world without evil. The world I am talking of is a world without *systems* of evil, without systematic mechanisms allocating fortune or misery, without, to quote an already half-forgotten Hollywood actor, 'empires of evil'. I am assuming no change in the everyday mixture of good and evil in Mr Smith or Ms Jones. And I think I am rare among Utopians having envisaged, in a one-paragraph summary of paradise, people bed-ridden with sickness, and people dying.

**Modern Socialist** All right, but it is still very abstract and vapoury. More than that, even at the level of supreme principles you seem to be fucking things up. The communist and socialist project has always had a clear goal, universal human emancipation. Why are you leaving out the goal of emancipation? Has it become too revolutionary, 'fundamentalist' even, perhaps?

**Answer** This is a crucial difference between modernism and post modernity, which has dawned upon me only lately. I honestly do not think that a socialist or radical project can be summed up in terms of 'emancipation' any more. Emancipation is a key to the politics of modernity, a politics of liberation from the shackles of the *ancien regime*, or of traditional society, monarchical rule supposedly by the grace of God, class exploitation, bigotry, prejudice, patriarchy, racism. Emancipation remains on the agenda in most parts of the world, above all, in the form of women's emancipation, but also of ethnic/national and class. However, the concept of emancipation presupposes that of oppression/exploitation, as a clear baseline from which to move. In advanced capitalist democracies it is difficult, and unconvincing, to conceive of women or workers as generally and unqualifiedly oppressed and as exploited (other than in the accountant's sense of an academic class analysis). Such societies do contain features of oppression and exploitation, and thereby tasks of emancipation, but the former do not hold as general characteristics of life in those societies. *Human life-realisation* has the advantage of not being tied to one linear movement, from oppression to freedom, but of connoting, at the same time, an infinite plurality of life-projects and a universal yardstick, the human life-span universally possible at a given level of world resources and medical knowledge.

### **Round Two: About Life And The Economy**

**Liberal Sceptic And Modern Socialist** Your vision seems to entail a biologisation of politics and of social life. Does that mean that you accept the current capitalist economy as the most efficient one?

**Answer** No-one but a fool would say that the present is the best of all possible worlds. Only hopeless Utopians

may dream of capitalism lasting for ever. But it is true that I have reformulated the socialist project, from being couched in terms of property, markets, and the state, into basic concerns of human life.

**Liberal Sceptic** But that implies a recognition of markets and of capitalism, doesn't it?

**Answer** Of markets yes, of capitalism no. The marxist conception of socialism was based on an analysis of capitalism asserting its intrinsic contradictoriness. The development of capitalism would bring about an increasing dysfunctionality between the private relations of production and the increasingly public(ly dependent) forces of production. That did happen, up to about 1950, expressed in the socialisation of mass communications and mass transport, even of natural resources held to constitute the 'commanding heights' of the economy. For another 15 years there was the establishment of a public management of the economy, of its growth rate and its business cycle. The process of international cartelisation, which culminated in the 1930s, was part of the same tendency. Since then, however, the world market and the multinational corporation have reasserted themselves, against both cartels and states, although the publicly managed economy remains - and will remain.

**Liberal Sceptic** But why don't you then accept the superiority of the capitalist market? Isn't that what it implied both in the reforms of Deng Hsiao Ping and in the *perestroika* of Gorbachev?

**Answer** The functioning of the market is dependent on the initial distribution of endowments, and the current distribution of resources in the world denies the possibility of a decent human life to hundreds of millions of people. That distribution has to be changed. There seems to be no empirical evidence, that speculative financial markets have any positive function in what serious liberal economists sometimes call 'the real economy', and often the former have clearly negative effects on production and work. The increasing power of financial capital has to be reversed. The market is furthermore a poor mechanism for dealing with fundamental human questions - for which there are no clear compensatory trade-offs - with choices of rare frequency and/or of special information requirement. The market can function rather well with regard to your choice of consumer goods, but rather badly, for instance, with respect to what old-age care you, as a resourceful prime-age adult, may need in the far-off future as an elderly person.

Intellectually, it is interesting that probably the most popular metaphor of contemporary rational action theory is 'the prisoner's dilemma', which is a sad story of two or more people who cannot communicate and co-operate with each other, and who therefore, as rational

egoists, end up much worse than they would have scored if they had been able to co-operate. This example teaches us a lesson exactly opposite to that of the 'invisible hand' of the market.

### Round Three: About Socialism And Liberalism

**Modern Socialist** But if you hold those views, why don't you present a clear picture of a socialist economy? Instead you are presenting a vision devoid of any concrete institutions. Wouldn't it be more honest to say, in your case, that you are abandoning the idea of socialism for another vision or Utopia of a more general humanistic kind?

**Answer** The vision I am seeing presupposes a complete overhaul of the distribution of endowments, of property and propertylessness, and a complete change of the relationships between financial and productive institutions. Those changes would entail a universal equalisation of life-chances and a decisive role allotted to productive, in contrast to merely appropriating, creativity. Therefore, my vision implies a number of crucial institutional changes, which are all contained within the traditions of socialism. However, in contrast to classical socialists I am not sure what the new institutions needed would look like exactly.

**Liberal Sceptic** Fine, but isn't that tantamount to civilised liberalism?

**Answer** In case you should recognise your liberalism in my vision, or somebody else social democracy, Christian democracy, ecologism, or x-, y- or z-ism, I would be happy, because that would mean a broadened support for it. The sectarian preoccupation with drawing demarcation lines is alien to me.

**Liberal Sceptic** Thank you, but doesn't that amount to an abandonment of socialism as a specific political tendency?

**Answer** There is a basic continuity with modern socialism, in universalism, in historicity, and in concentrating on scrutinising and changing the content of social and political forms, the social human contents of political constitutions and sets of juridical rights, and the structuring of situations of choice with systematic outcomes of affluence on the one side and misery on the other.

### Round Four: On History And Historical Tendencies

**Modern Socialist** Why do you put such an emphasis on history in your three concepts summary? Isn't that more than anything else a cover-up for the fact that you have substituted a Utopian vision for the marxist theory of history?

**Answer** No, the reason is an aim at retaining a link with 'scientific socialism', ie, with the location of socialism in actually existing history. But I had also something else in mind, more directly

related to my conception of life politics. A vision of a better world must contain a sense of link with, and thereby responsibility for, the future, for coming generations. No generation has the right to destroy life-chances for the next one(s). That is a constraint on universal life-realisation.

**Modern Socialist** Talk about 'history' is not enough! The scientificity of historical materialism's conception of socialism was that it analysed how the latter developed out of the contradictions and of the social conflicts of capitalism. But your so-called vision is not derived from any analysis of historical tendencies of contradiction and conflict. You are only holding up a picture, hoping that some people will find it attractive. Do you see any social forces with an interest or tendency to bring them about?

**Answer** The most concrete answer to your first question is that my vision involves a universalisation and a deepening of the institutions of the most advanced welfare states. Secondly, it follows up the vital issues brought on to the historical agenda by the progressive women's movement, of gender relations, modes of human reproduction, and of the quality of personal relations in the systems of institutional forms. Thirdly, my vision expresses an alignment with the actualisation of basic questions of the character of the human environment put forward by the ecological movement. What I see are all tendencies of the 'new times'.

**Modern Socialist** Is it deliberate that you refrain from referring to any economic tendencies of contemporary capitalism?

**Answer** The welfare state, the women's uprising, environmental concerns have all grown out of affluent developed capitalism, out of forces and issues generated within it, although the processes have been very complex and are irreducible to a purely economic dialectic. Between these tendencies and capitalism, there are fundamental conflicts, which does not mean incompatibility or impossibility of coexistence, however. After all, life is not incompatible with violence, cruelty, and fraud, for instance. But wouldn't you admit that life would be more pleasant without them?

**Liberal Sceptic** Why don't you relate to the rise of the post-industrial knowledge economy with its substitution of information for toil and capital, of networks for hierarchy, of flexibility for rigid rules, of de-centralisation for centralisation?

**Answer** The tendencies of contemporary capitalism are ambiguous in their social implications. While Taylorist, army-type bureaucracies are clearly on their way out, industrial production is of declining economic weight, and the computerisation of information and of the use of information are clearly of rapidly growing economic importance, no clear pattern

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is emerging, bestseller ideologies notwithstanding. The global centralisation of corporate power is growing simultaneously with decentralisation within corporate organisations. Union busting and idiosyncratic personal management are increasing alongside more and more autonomous personnel involvement. Rent for attractive, increasingly scarce natural estate, and for urban real estate is rapidly growing in importance in contemporary capitalism. The manipulation of, or privileged exclusive access to, information are becoming increasingly important means of capital accumulation. And so forth. Very significant in these ambiguously contradictory economic tendencies is, I think, the growing role of a large category of qualified employees, overcoming manual/non-manual divisions, the commitment and the sophisticated life-demands of whom productive capital is getting crucially dependent upon. People of this kind are already providing much of the support for new humanistic movements, and given an institutional chance they could also give a new impetus to the labour movement. The counter-strategy of capital and conservatism, however, is to try to segment these employees in corporate and local loyalties and to isolate them from the rest of the population, from the bulk of the service workers, traditional production workers, the unemployed, and the retired.

The two basic institutions of welfare states are (membership) rights and care. As a member of a relevant category, as a citizen, or as a member of some other group, you as a person have a right to certain services and forms of support, regardless of your property status and of your ability to pay the going market price. Secondly, most of what existing welfare states do is to provide care for people, care for the sick, the infirm, and the elderly, care for children to grow up and learn. The rights of persons and taking care of people have a tense, conflictual relation to the principle of exclusion inherent in the notions of property and purchase, and to the production and circulation of commodities.

The women's movement challenged the male particularisms in the prevailing conceptions of freedom and equality, solidarity and socialism. In that respect the movement has been a tendency of universalism. Pertinent in this context is also another feature of the feminist insurrection, its concern with the quality of personal human relations - between men and women above all, but also among women, among men, and between adults and children. Autonomy, dignity, authenticity, concern in human relations are standards or demands raised in defiance of instrumentalism and commodification. A third aspect of the women's movement that I find particularly appealing, is its combination of a radical individualism with collective action and solidarity. Feminism chal-

lenged the unproblematised collectivity of the family - the hidden cupboard of most bourgeois individualism, a cupboard full of victims of patriarchal power and despotism. It did that pointing towards a more authentic individualism, which at the same time entailed a universalistic concern with and care for other human beings.

The ecological movement has put life environment at the centre of attention. Like all radical movements, including the classical socialist one, it also contains dubious elements, fragile prophecies of imminent doom, puritanical moralisms an upper middle-class neglect of the work and housing environment of ordinary people. However, ecologists have made invaluable contributions to a new life politics, demonstrating the lethal or seriously damaging, unnecessary threats of pollution, poisoning, and the destruction of nature.

### Round Five: The Welfare State And Statism

**Liberal Sceptic** But isn't the welfare state a bureaucratic dinosaur which is now being challenged both from the Left and the Right as something which has to be replaced, or at least cut down, by a 'welfare society', of one form or another?

**Answer** You are mistaking the current institutional forms for the basic principles of the welfare state, and the current ideological steam around those forms. The core of the welfare state is that the reproduction of the population of a given political entity is a public, political responsibility. Neither Thatcher nor Reagan and their acolytes have been able to challenge the right of people in need to support and to service. Neither has been able to do away with institutions of human care and concern. The development of the productive forces, of science and technology, will require more education, rather than less. The growth of medical knowledge and technology will raise the demand and the supply of care in the future. Ageing populations will need much more care.

It is certainly not inconceivable, that the current right-wing tendencies of restricting the services and the care given to the ordinary human being without property, and the properly conducted insurance policy to the shoddiest possible minimum, will continue, and even aggravate. But the life politics issues of human reproduction, of the education, the curing, the caring, and the keeping healthy of the population will not go away. Nor will they be buried in families and networks outside common political responsibility and organisation. The traditional socialist Left has lost sight of the meaning of the welfare state through a myopia of economic functionalism and a macho preoccupation with 'high politics'.

**Liberal Sceptic** But surely, any serious attempt at new thinking would

have to break with the statism of the traditional Left?

**Answer** True, that the public corporation and the planning commissariat, even some of the large public health care authorities, no longer inspire the confidence and enthusiasm they once did. But statism or anti-statism is not the real issue. To put the choices in those terms is a diversionary manoeuvre. What is needed is to put the most important social problems into focus, and then to discuss the proper institutional forms. For everybody on this earth to have a chance to realise a decent life, in view of the resources and the knowledge available to humankind today, a lot of public political intervention and regulation will be absolutely necessary. But new forms of public intervention and organisation will certainly be called for. I am no reliable defender of actually existing welfare state forms, but you will never lure me into any

debate.

### Round Six: Social Forces

**Modern Socialist** You never answered directly my question about the possible social forces that might be mobilised for your Utopia. I also wonder, from what you did say, if you mean that there is a growing contradiction between capitalism and what you call universal life-realisation?

**Answer** There has been so much growth in the contradictions of capitalism in past socialist rhetoric, that considerable caution seems proper for a while. I am not saying that the internal contradictions of contemporary capitalism are growing or are likely to grow in the foreseeable future. What I am saying, is that the conflicts between capitalism, even advanced affluent capitalism, on the one hand, and the universal possibility of realising a meaningful, dignified, and reasonably decent and healthy life do not show the slightest tendency to disappear. And at least in some areas the gap between the potential and the actuality of human life is definitely increasing. We see that in the expansion of poverty in the United States, in the enduring, American-type ghetto-producing mass unemployment in most parts of Western Europe, in the increased pollution of many cities and waters, in the growing destruction of children and youth (visible in addiction, violence, crime, and prostitution), in the glaringly inadequate care for the elderly also in the richest countries, in the increase of misery in large parts of the Third World, and in the persisting threats of ecological disaster.

Life politics has no single or even central subject. That is a handicap in short-term power politics. On the other hand, it can, or might, draw upon a broad spectrum of social and cultural forces, which in terms of long and medium-term societal transformations

is a source of strength.

The labour movement, in so far as it is a class movement rather than an aggregate of interest groups pursuing sectional interests, and the movements of the popular classes or the poor people of the Third World, in so far as they are movements of popular needs rather than merely waves of frustration or objects of demogogy, are certainly necessary forces. Without them, life politics would tend to become a concern for the quality of life among the affluent and prosperous only.

Women, not just the women's movement, are and will probably become another major force. Whatever the reasons, women are, and seem likely to remain (as far as we can see), over-represented in reproductive work (paid as well as unpaid) and tend to be more concerned with the quality of the human condition. In the past, family seclusion and confinement to a narrowly religious interpretation of existential issues tended to make women more politically conservative than men. That is now changing, and turning the other way around. Of course, women constitute no one tendency, and they will continue to spread over the political spectrum. But it seems likely, that women will have a strong, stronger than men, tendency to support radical politics for universal human life-realisation.

Various aspects of what I have here called life politics is also what various groups of concerned middle-class people, mostly professionals of one kind or another, have already committed themselves to. Environmentalist groups, human rights groups, people concerned with helping victims of famines, disasters, and of persecution. While here there has been an erosion and a demoralisation of the traditional Left, the right-wing politics currently in vogue in several countries does not seem to have extinguished, or even lowered, commitments to specific issues of humanistic concern, does not seem to have lowered the vistas of the whole middle classes to political concerns with taxation rates, mortgage interests, and portfolio trajectories only.

**Liberal Sceptic** But if there are so many people and movements of goodwill, why does the world then look the way you say it does? Or do you mean, that paradise is imminent?

**Answer** My answer to your second question is no, and to your first would be too long to print here. But, as a general point, the people of this world are caught up in a welter of conflicting situations, structured by a starkly unequal distribution of resources, constrained by economic competition and power rivalry, and affected by unintended, unforeseen, as well as by conflicting consequences of action. The progressive forces I referred to above are also entangled in this web. What is needed is to cut a path on which a life politics can stand tall, can see its own

vista, and can walk forward. That task of clearance is first a task of reorienting the political debate, such as we are doing here. How such a reorientation should take shape in line-ups for power for change is a later question. And, changing the terms of prevailing discussion will already in itself bring about some changes in existing institutions and configurations of power.

### Round Seven:

#### A Summing Up Of Issues

**Modern Socialist** Please, could you formulate the reorientation you are talking about into an understandable everyday political language? What do you want us to do?

**Answer** I am not going to present a party platform nor a blueprint for the next socialist revolution. But I will sum up my argument in a few points. What I am suggesting is, first of all, to take a step behind economic and political institutions and to begin to formulate the tasks of radical (socialist, progressive, humanist, democratic) politics in terms of people's life-environment and their life-chances, of everybody's possibility of realising the full potentiality of human life, with the constraint that this possibility should be preserved for future members of humankind.

This perspective puts certain issues and political tasks in the foreground.

- Disarmament (not necessarily unilateral), arms control, attempts at preventing or defusing armed conflicts.
- Universalistic human solidarity, fighting racism, sexism and ethnic oppression, overcoming exclusivist nationalisms.
- Health and adequate healthcare for everybody, which means a frontal assault on national, ethnic, and class differences in mortality, morbidity, and well-being; provision of decent care for the infirm and for the elderly.
- Education to enable a full participation in a continuously developing society with a secure milieu of growth for all children and youth, and possibilities for further education for adults.
- A distribution of material resources and rewards egalitarian enough to make a decent human life a possibility for everybody, which means massive efforts at restructuring the material life chances of people within most countries (not least Britain), and the construction of new forms of cross-national support and development co-operation.
- A restructuring of personal and social relations so as to render individual autonomy possible for all women as well as for all men.
- Work, with basic health safety, and potential for human growth for everybody who wants to take part in the economy. An organisation of social time which makes it possible and easy for people to arrange their life-time according to their choice of

remunerated work, care for children, kin, and friends, education and re-training, and of leisure and recreation.

- De-pollution of air and water, economic growth and life-realisation only under the constraint of nature conservation. Nature has to be recognised politically and economically for what most of us know privately already, that nature should not just be an object of human conquest, since it is a basic aspect of the quality of human life. Large efforts have to be made at finding out and doing something about the life-damaging consequences of produced substances and waste products, and of various human practices.
- A reorganisation of urban life and of the different opportunities in cities and in the countryside with a view to the abolition of slums and metropolitan congestion and to steering the trade-off between anonymous freedom and, on the other hand, vandalism, violence, criminality, and abandoned despair into more positive directions.

**Liberal Sceptic** Beautiful! and who is to foot the bill?

**Answer** All of us. This cannot be paid for by the rich only. But almost all of us will also benefit from it, to a larger or smaller extent.

**Modern Socialist** You didn't say a word about capitalism, or, for that matter, socialism!

**Answer** The gist of my argument is, that the issues of life environment and life chances should be put first, and that the economic institutions most adequate to the former will have to be found out later. The issues I give priority to are certainly different from maximising capital accumulation. Nay, they require a drastic restriction of the sway of capitalist property and capital accumulation. In that sense they follow a classical socialist line. On the other hand, I am quite aware of the dynamism of a market economy and of the requirement of economic and administrative managerial competence. In order to give everybody on this earth a decent life environment and decent life chances we need a very efficient economy and very efficient forms of organisation in all walks of life. Markets and professional management will without doubt be necessary. But for the rest, what organisational forms and systems we should head for I am not sure of. The crucial thing is, in my opinion, that the latter will be geared to the goal of giving everybody the possibility of realising the full potential of a human life in a fresh environment.

### Round Eight. . .

**The Editor** You haven't allowed your opponents to concede defeat or to be knocked out, so this could go on forever. But, in case you should want to publish these scribbles you had better stop now!

**Answer** Yes sir. •

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