

The Soul of Socialism: Connecting with the People's Values

by Stephen J. Fortunato Jr. Monthly Review July – August 2005

“Theory becomes a material force,” wrote Karl Marx, “once it seizes the masses.”¹ The obverse is also true: if theory does not “seize the masses,” it becomes impotent and irrelevant. Today, in the United States and many other countries, a socialist critique has been excluded from political and popular debate regarding critical economic and social problems. One reason for this is the domination of the mainstream media by corporations, but the existence of a capitalist propaganda mill does not absolve socialists for failing to translate their trenchant and sound observations about the existing social and political order into language that will resonate with the values of the readers or listeners who are the putative beneficiaries of any socialist transformation.

This era of capitalist triumphalism is a difficult one for socialists, with corporations, backed by national armies and freelance mercenaries, swaggering across the planet raising everywhere the flags of globalization and empire. Our times are marked by the overlapping and exponentially expanding calamities of unemployment, squalor, and hunger. For many, the imperium delivers the ultimate tragedy of imprisonment, maiming, or death, leaving the socialist who has been spared life in a bombed-out city or a polluted third-world outpost, and who can marshal the energy and hope to speak, asking the questions socialists have always put to themselves: What must be done? and, What must I do?

But before any answers can be submitted, the left must candidly acknowledge that its multifaceted message to bring about social justice and a radical transformation of the economic arrangements now favoring 10 percent of the world's population while battering the other 90 percent has failed to reach the masses of people who stand to benefit from a reordering of the existing world economic system. In the industrialized nations, nothing remotely approaching a substantial minority, let alone a majority, has been convinced by socialist critique to move toward fundamental change. Socialism suffers from a malaise often marked by abstruse language and parochial essentialisms, not to mention estrangement from the masses. The left has failed to inspire the majority of people, for whom life is a losing economic struggle, to turn against the laws and institutions that make their penurious lives inevitable.

Despite the exigencies of the times, socialists, though armed with all the damning information and statistics available, have not found an effective way to cast the plutocrats, their supplicants, and their satraps, as criminal masterminds who engage daily in the exploitation of labor and the plundering of resources to support their profligate lifestyles of million dollar salaries, overpriced watches and SUVs, and second and third homes, while blissfully heedless that their behavior sinks the majority of people into debt and compels them to endure mediocre or desperate wages, if they can find a job at all. Socialists have failed to ignite the consciousness of the people with an awareness that the dominant class of capitalists—that class that commands exorbitant salaries, stock options, golden parachutes, and access to governors, senators, and presidents—are far more immoral and infinitely more destructive of the social fabric than those members of the underclass who survive through petty larceny and drug sales.

Recognizing this, the questions persist: Why, in the face of pervasive inequality and injustice, is there not broad support for the socialist agenda? Why are not thousands of people, even hundreds of thousands, mobilizing for a sustained struggle against the selfish and bellicose class now controlling the planet? Yes, at least ten million people surged into the streets worldwide when Bush unleashed his unlawful bombardment on Iraq; and yes, the Socialist Party in Spain ousted from office the party that supported Bush in the fraudulently named “coalition of the willing.” And Hugo Chávez, the populist-socialist president of Venezuela, defies Bush as he seeks to improve the lot of the poor in his country and region.

From my vantage point as a trial judge, I am a daily witness to the consequences of the failures of liberals, progressives, and democratic socialists clearly and emphatically to brand the greed and prosperity of the oligarchy as the primary cause and precondition for the economic, social, educational, and medical burdens of the dispossessed, the working poor, and that amorphous group defined as the “middle class.” As a trial judge, I am

necessarily a part-time referee in the class struggle. For the past ten years as a judge, and before that for two decades as a civil rights and criminal defense attorney, I have seen the unemployed and the underemployed paraded into court to defend themselves for expropriating cash necessary to purchase life's necessities as well as a ticket to the trappings of the American dream, cash unavailable to them through their third- and fourth-rate jobs. I have seen the sick and the hopeless prosecuted for obtaining drugs from the neighborhood pusher because the painkillers and mood-lifters dispensed to the affluent by suburban physicians and psychiatrists never come closer to them than the TV ads of pharmaceutical companies urging the consumption of pills to escape to a world marketed as nirvana by other advertisers. I see the marginalized—black, brown, yellow, and white—pursued by usurious and unscrupulous debt collectors seeking to repossess cars and furniture sold with deceptive, high pressure tactics in the first place. Misery and collateral damage are the regular byproducts of the unjust and immoral (to use a term socialists wrongly abjure) economic arrangements that undergird the legal system. What the English poet, Oliver Goldsmith, lamented in 1764 is still true: “Law grinds the poor, and rich men rule the law.”²

Why has the left been unable to expose in a way that encourages political upheaval the nexus between the excessive concentration of wealth among the few and the pervasive privation of the many? Why is it not a matter of common sense and conventional wisdom that the system that allows the former simultaneously also demands the latter? Reams of data are displayed in the cold numbers of United Nations' Human Development Reports, government studies, and scholarly and journalistic essays, while the excesses of the oligarchy are depicted in the hotter milieu of newspaper society pages, celebrity TV magazines, and advertisements in *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and similar vehicles designed to encourage consumption through emulation. It is no secret, for example, that the wealthiest 5 percent of the people control nearly 60 percent of this nation's wealth or that with average annual compensation of \$11,000,000, CEO's of major corporations earn more than four hundred times the yearly pay of their workers; and all this churns onward as the number of people in the United States living beneath the ludicrously low poverty level of \$18,660 (for a family of four no less) has increased to thirty-five million people.

So why then do the mass of people, unable or hard-pressed to obtain necessities, whether safe and sound housing, medical insurance, or tuition at a community college, accept the current economic and political arrangements as results of immutable forces of nature? One short answer is that the bread-and-circus culture of sports, sitcoms, and squawking heads masquerading as journalists has numbed analytical powers and persuaded people that their political options have shriveled to the exercise of an essentially pointless vote every few years, a vote thrown away on the candidate who most adroitly manipulates perceptions by spending huge sums of money on campaign advertisements. More than three decades ago, Stanley Aronowitz in *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness*,³ brilliantly dissected the workplace, popular culture, schools, and other institutions to demonstrate how capitalism succeeds through programming the consciousness of the factory worker, the mechanic, and the sales clerk to mimic that of a chieftain of industry. Since then, Edward Herman, Noam Chomsky,⁴ Robert McChesney,⁵ and others have chronicled the “manufacture of consent” by a mass media structurally and strategically entwined with the corporate and political elites. And this year, in *What's the Matter with Kansas?*,⁶ Thomas Frank has shown how reactionary Republicans have cajoled the working class and farmers in America's “heartland” to abandon their progressive traditions and vote against their own economic interests by deluging them relentlessly with cynical campaigns calling for the defense of down-home values of God and hearth against the liberal onslaught of abortion, gay rights, and Hollywood. Liberal journals have entered the fray with the *American Prospect* in its March 2004 issue running several essays under the rubric, “Campaign '04: Liberals and Values,” and the *Nation* in August 2004 featuring an article titled “Closing the ‘Religion Gap.’” Even the somnolent Democrats have jumped aboard the values train and now tussle with Republicans over flag, yeomen virtues, and apple pie while submerging, just as the Republicans do, the nasty truths about their millionaire patrons, the rigged economy, and the misery it causes the majority of the world's people.

Somewhere along the way to their stockbrokers, the oligarchy has convinced the American people to invert the classic Greek ideal admired by the nation's founders, that is, the notion that a person earns the esteem of the community by advancing collective interests, and that the home is a private sphere beyond the concern of the government. Currently, the reactionary agenda holds that government is ordained to regulate intimate sexual matters but is barred from scrutinizing and regulating that most communal of human activities, the production and exchange of labor and goods.

In the face of this dismal state of affairs, the questions persist: What must be done? Put another way: What is the soul of socialism and where should it direct its energies? The soul of socialism is heart, a passion for social justice,

yet all the passion—and compassion—we can muster will be wasted if our critique is not stated with references to values the majority of people live by—or at least revere.

The people I encounter in court know they have been given the short end of a bitter stick, and the stick is inedible no matter how much peanut butter they put on it. They know that even if they work hard at their grimy and strenuous jobs, their reward, if they are lucky, will be a few extra dollars in their paycheck, but surely no chance for boardroom income and stock options. Their lot is to struggle and endure dilapidated housing, shoddy schools, and uneven medical care. Joe Hill notwithstanding, few of them have the time to either mourn or organize.

To recast Georges Clemenceau's famous remark that war is too important a business to be left to the generals, the division and distribution of community goods and benefits, both necessary and superfluous, are too important to be left to corporate CEO's and boards of directors. The CEO's and the boards, of course, could not dictate outcomes unless they enjoyed a symbiotic entanglement with the elected and appointed officials who create the legal framework in which corporations thrive. In return, the politicians receive buckets of cash for their elections along with hours of free airtime and streams of favorable ink in the mass media applauding their reign.

The role of the socialist has always been to expose and challenge the conditions that allow the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, and the concomitant hardscrabble existence of the many. Now, in the early years of the twenty-first century, confrontation is as necessary as it was in 1848, or 1968, but the challenge to awaken, let alone transform, a consciousness shaped by the prevailing corporate, political, and media propaganda apparatus is infinitely more difficult and complex than it was 150 years ago. The fundamental structural and legal changes necessary—be they the criminalization of corporate predations, direct taxation of wealth, the regulating of wages and profits and so on—have all been studied carefully by progressives and socialists (and indeed implemented in some countries); but as Daniel Singer pointed out in [*Whose Millennium?: Theirs or Ours?*](#)⁷ no legislative or workplace reforms are possible without the support of large numbers of radicalized workers, students, and others drawn from the ranks of the disenfranchised.

What Marx called “the fetishism of commodities”⁸ is embedded more than ever in the psyches of people of all social and economic backgrounds. The “fetishism” that Marx wrote of was not the “need” for luxury products, sleeker automobiles, and electronic gadgetry created by advertising industry psychologists, though this will to possess, consume, and adorn helps sustain capitalism as it diverts the attention of those mesmerized by a multiplicity of shiny things from the desperate plight of others. What concerned Marx was the assignment of a value to an inert object created or at least shaped, improved, or harvested, by the labor of a worker. The transfer of that object in commerce from one person or group of persons to another makes it a commodity with a value that is both represented and skewed by the universal form of exchange, money. Marx emphasized that the use of money drapes a “mystical veil,” to use his words, over the “social character of labor.”⁹ If we lived in self-contained, extended family units or agrarian communes, with no money mediating the exchange of products, the social character of labor would be obvious and each type of labor would manifest its true nature as existing in a rough parity with every other type of labor.

It is when the commune or village sends its products elsewhere, in return for a payment in money, that the mysterious problem of price and value presents itself. Marx invites us to view a functioning and complex economy as an integrated system of production and exchange. “Let us now picture to ourselves...a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour-power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour-power of the community. All the characteristics of...labour...are social, instead of individual....The total product of our community is a social product.”¹⁰ So we can look at this pulsating community and see the trash collector hauling away debris forty hours a week, the plumber installing and repairing pipes forty hours a week, the physician dispensing prescriptions and suturing cuts for forty hours, the baker making bread, and so on. We know that under the prevailing order, these individuals will receive radically disparate amounts of money to buy the necessities of life, not to mention things that are unnecessary or even luxurious. For Marx, this wage disparity is traceable to the arbitrary, and often vicious, assignment of value by the owners of the productive apparatus to the objects that become commodities in commerce.

The cruel charade to Marx was that the efforts of the worker are primarily represented by the value the capitalist assigns to the product the worker produces; but, scoffs Marx, the “formulae” for setting both wages and the prices of commodities “appear to the bourgeois intellect to be as much a self-evident necessity imposed by Nature as productive labor itself.” Today's conservatives, without a whimper of protest from liberals, have convinced the majority of people as well as most pundits that market forces are beyond human control. These capitalist apologists

will allow the tweaking of interest rates, but whine that a federal minimum wage of \$5.15 an hour cannot be substantially increased, let alone doubled, without incurring the wrath of Mother Nature.

Marx was a moralist, but his writings are devoid of moralizing and pleas to the reader's sensibilities about justice and fairness. But one socialist forebearer who relished condemning capitalist plutocrats on the basis of their own moral principles (or pretensions) was the English aesthete, painter, and critic, John Ruskin. Writing in 1862, five years before Marx completed the first volume of *Capital*, Ruskin hurled four essays collected under the title *Unto this Last*¹¹ into the teeth of the industrialists and economists who created—and then rationalized—the abominable conditions of the English working class. Surprisingly, history does not record any contact between Marx and Ruskin, and their writings do not appear to contain any references to the other; but they were kindred spirits in their criticisms of the existing order, with Ruskin more aggressive than Marx in skewering sanctimonious capitalists for profiting excessively from economic arrangements that belied their professed Christian values.

Like Marx, Ruskin decried the iniquitous manner in which wages and prices were set, but his greatest hostility was reserved for the economists who proclaimed that there was no room in the marketplace for considerations of justice and compassion. As a philosopher of art, Ruskin sought to define the true and the beautiful, and he brought his quest for harmony and balance to his study of the economic system. He concluded that a focus dominated by production goals, with scant regard for what was being produced and a chilly indifference to whether elementary and wholesome needs were being satisfied, resulted in an unjust, even dangerous, state of affairs. To produce with little purpose other than to serve the frivolous desires and plans of the wealthy, while the basic needs of the masses went unmet, was immoral.

For Ruskin, the unnecessary evil he saw everywhere was the imbalance between the wealth of the few and the depredation of the majority. Like Marx, Ruskin did not believe that these conditions were inevitable, but he recognized that it was in the interests of the manufacturing and commercial class to perpetuate the idea they were. Ruskin had no illusions that a perfect justice could be achieved, but he believed that great advances were possible if people recognized that it is not nature but the economic and legal arrangements crafted by the powerful that lock people in poverty: "It [is] the privilege of the fishes as it is of rats and wolves to live by the laws of demand and supply; but the distinction of humanity, to live by those of right."¹²

Money, the medium by which the few who possess it in great sums exercise control over the many who do not, is always in finite supply. The capitalist economic system makes the opportunity for access to fortunes by a comparatively small number of people depend directly on the impoverishment and impotence of the many. Forty hours as a foot press operator means a shabby apartment, balky car, and inadequate diet; and forty hours as a high school teacher means a better home and car than the foot press operator, but a staggering debt for two children to go to four-year colleges; but forty hours as an investment banker means second houses, maids, yachts and other toys. Ruskin, like Marx, repudiates the myth, prevailing in his time and also in ours, that the economy, and more particularly, wages, cannot be regulated: "Perhaps one of the most curious facts in the history of human error is the denial by the common political economists of the possibility of thus regulating wages; while for all the important and much of the unimportant, labour on the earth, wages are already so regulated."¹³ Modern day plutocrats, like their Victorian predecessors, use the institutions of government, politics, and the media, to keep wages and benefits depressed, tax breaks for the wealthy plentiful, and regulations minimal, all to maximize profits, and all while hiding behind the shibboleths of "family values," "freedom," and "equal opportunity."

And so we see that Marx and Ruskin, probably ignorant of each other's work, reached the same conclusions, Marx with the more rigorous scholarship, and Ruskin, despite his Tory roots, with the more fervid denunciation of the immorality and sanctimony of the ruling class. Side by side, these two geniuses present a paradigm for socialists today: chronicle the statistics and obvious failings of the system, then communicate this information, in terms of the values people live by, to demonstrate that markets are not driven by forces of nature but are rather the results of human actions that generate conditions profoundly offensive to every extant religious and ethical system. People may not understand the prose of Marx and Ruskin, but, in my experience, people know if they have been wrongfully accused or if their paycheck is not a fair compensation for the time and effort they expend; they know if medical and dental care is beyond reach or third-rate; and they know if they are breaking their backs or destroying their lungs because their inferior education has left them no alternative but to take dangerous and low-paying jobs. They also respond keenly to the language of right and wrong.

Assisted by the insights of Marx and Ruskin, the modern day socialist must explain with logic and clarity, not to mention with rhetorical persuasiveness, this state of circumstances to an audience wider than subscribers to left-wing journals. We can begin with appeals to fairness and justice, notions that are easily understood and felt by the members of the working and middle classes.

Three examples from the recent past manifest the power, if not the necessity, of an appeal to morality, virtue, and a craving for social justice to achieve fundamental change. The first was the civil rights struggle led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The language and content of his actions were based on principles that he and his adherents claimed were divinely revealed and which they adopted to the exigencies of contemporary segregation and discrimination.

Following upon the heels of and coalescing with the civil rights struggle was the sustained protest against the war in Vietnam. The antiwar movement was not as overtly religious as the civil rights struggle, but it numbered many religious individuals and groups among its leadership, notably Fathers Daniel and Phil Berrigan, the Reverend William Sloan Coffin, the Catholic Worker Movement, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the American Friends Service Committee.

The most noteworthy example of a successful moral appeal to a majority of non-activist, even apolitical, people is the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, first in overthrowing the brutal U.S. puppet, Anastasio Somoza, and then in resisting the illegal U.S.-sponsored war of aggression by the Contras against the Sandinista government. I was in Nicaragua in 1983 and 1985 for short periods during the civil war and saw everywhere the easy and graceful blending of a Marxist view of economics and class struggle with the social teachings of the Christian gospels. This happy—and some would say holy—alliance both befuddled and provoked Reagan and his imperialist cohorts. The lie Reagan promoted was that Nicaragua was becoming a Soviet outpost in the western hemisphere, yet there were few, if any, Russian advisors or military personnel in Nicaragua. The country's infrastructure, damaged by Contra and CIA attacks, remained in a state of disrepair, the most salient example being the destruction of oil storage tanks in the Pacific port of Corinto by rockets launched from high-powered speedboats.

What Reagan really feared was an alliance between religious people and Marxists or the blending of a Marxist critique with Christian social teachings in the consciousness of one person. A Sandinista slogan was, in fact, "there is no contradiction between faith and the revolution." These approaches represented a significant potential for anticapitalist, anti-imperialist change throughout Latin America. Reagan and his advisors were astute enough to know that the Sandinistas had chosen a course different from that of Castro, who had made the unfortunate mistake of ostracizing people with religious affiliations from the party. Whatever their successes or defeats, the civil rights struggle, the antiwar movement, and the Sandinista revolution show that a program for social justice, coupled with a call to others to join in the struggle, can—and sometimes must—be stated in terms of morality and virtue.

Any call for justice and fairness will confront the big lie of the mega-capitalists that the disparities of wealth and resources are caused by market forces that are as inevitable as the tides. These forces may be studied in the way that a chemist studies minerals, but they may not be regulated or restrained, any more than winds can be controlled by a meteorologist. The implication of this capitalist cosmology is that notions of justice, fairness, and compassion play no role. Spring breezes and hurricanes are neither just nor unjust, and, according to this view, the same is true of the salaries of CEO's and hotel maids: they just are.

A clear appeal is needed now more than ever to the deepest values of the middle and working classes, not to mention the destitute, as their consciousness has been shaped by an educational bureaucracy that is producing functional and political illiterates who are overwhelmed by a culture blandishing unattainable glitter and celebrity. But even in the face of this, the working class venerates ethnic and religious traditions—undoubtedly to garner some inexpensive solace for their exhausting and troubled lives—that have buried within them calls for equality and social justice that are as poignant and relevant today as when they were first made. A few examples: "a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself"; "[n]o one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need, when others lack necessities"; many workers "simultaneously experience a situation of dependence on inhuman economic systems and institutions: a situation which, for many of them, borders on slavery, not only physical but also professional, cultural, civic and spiritual." The first of these statements is by Pope Leo XIII in the papal

encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, issued in 1891; the second is from *Populorum Progressio*, an encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI promulgated in 1967; and the last is from a declaration by Latin American bishops titled *Justice* issued at a conference in Medellin, Columbia in 1968.

These cries for justice surface sporadically but rarely become the daily fare of the people to whom they are addressed; and the mainstream media, always an eager conduit of the plutocrats' line, ignores these messages after the initial report. Even today, the chastising of wealthy nations for their selfishness and the United States for its horrific aggression against Iraq by Pope John Paul is buried under the continual reporting of his reactionary opinions on abortion and homosexuality, topics favored by both the mainstream media and right-wing talk show hosts to divert attention from suffering communities.

To paraphrase Aristotle, whatever is received is received according to the manner of the receiver; or to put it in earthier terms, a quart bottle cannot receive a gallon of liquid. The compassion that infuses the soul of socialism must embrace people where they are—and most people stand mutely in a world that has stilted their analytical powers while giving them perspectives that use the simple categories learned in church and school for judging behavior: good and bad, moral and immoral, virtuous and sinful. The capitalists have succeeded in twisting these meanings so that, in popular culture, vast sums of money, jewels, and yachts are seen as good, even as marks of virtue resulting from an efficient use of “freedom,” while poverty is considered immoral or even sinful, the consequence of laziness and a dissolute lifestyle. What the capitalists have not been able to eradicate are peoples' vestigial connections to traditions, cultures, and the primary texts of their belief systems, which universally condemn current economic arrangements.

No sage or savior has ever endorsed greed and gluttony as a path toward social justice or personal fulfillment. These sane and enlightened people come to us from all cultures and all eras, sometimes knowing of each other but more often not. Socrates and Jesus, Lao Tzu and Tolstoi, Gandhi and Martin Buber—no one can find in their lives and words a jot of support for a political and economic regime that encourages the acquisition and accumulation of wealth far beyond what is needed for the necessities—or even the restorative pleasures—of life, while consigning the masses to live and work in squalor.

The prevailing business ethos rejects the core teachings of the world's religions and literatures, as it establishes a contemporary priesthood of profiteers composed of the politicians, economists, and corporate chieftains who serve global capitalism. The scientific and rationalist part of the socialist soul may recoil from putting radical theory into moral terms, but this can be done easily and ethically without subscribing to any theology. One can condemn the siphoning of money into the coffers of the privileged while the majority scramble for crumbs as being obscene, immoral, unjust, and even sinful without believing in the parting of the Red Sea or the turning of water into wine.

There are proposed solutions as close at hand as history texts and scholarly journals, not to mention tax, regulatory, and distribution plans implemented with varying degrees of success in places as diverse as Norway, Cuba, Venezuela, and Switzerland, but no fundamental and radical change will occur until the majority of people feel with the passionate soul of a socialist that the criminally unfair division of wealth across this planet is not the result of impersonal forces of nature, but rather is attributable to immoral and calculating schemes of the capitalist oligarchs and the politicians they own. Daily struggles are needed in many venues—the shop floor, the courtroom, schools, and legislative chambers. Demonstrations, strikes, and the publication of books and journals are all part of the socialist task, but without a message that speaks to the people's values and redirects their energies, victories will be scarce indeed.

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Notes

1. Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 137.

2. Oliver Goldsmith, *The Traveller*, in *The Traveller and the Deserted Village*, W. Murison ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 1936).
3. Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1974).
4. Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).
5. See, e.g., Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (New York: New Press, 2000). See also, Edward Herman and Robert McChesney, *The Global Media: The New Missionaries of Corporate Capitalism* (London: Washington, D.C.: Cassel, 1997).
6. Thomas Frank, *What's the Matter with Kansas?: How Conservatives won the Heart of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).
7. Daniel Singer, *Whose Millennium?: Theirs or Ours?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999).
8. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publications House, 1954).
9. Marx, *Capital*, 80.
10. Marx, *Capital*, 78.
11. John Ruskin, *Unto This Last and Other Writings* (London: Penguin Group, 1997).
12. Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 194.
13. Ruskin, *Unto This Last*, 173.