Afraid to be free: Dependency as desideratum

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Abstract. Although collectivist ideas have everywhere fallen into disrepute, this essay argues that socialism nevertheless will survive and be extended in the new century. That gloomy prospect looms, not because socialism is more efficient or more just, but because ceding control over their actions to others allows individuals to escape, evade and even deny personal responsibilities. People are afraid to be free; the state stands in loco parentis. The breaching of plausibly acceptable fiscal limits in the first half of the new century will determine how the basic conflict between welfare dependency and liberal principles will be resolved.

1. Introduction

For this special issue, the editors asked me specifically to submit an essay under the general title, “Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century”. In this solicitation, they were encouraging me to think in grandiose terms – to offer a public choice–constitutional political economy perspective on the larger organizational-ideological alternatives that may emerge. We do not, of course, either collectively or privately, make choices as among the grand organizational alternatives. For the most part, and most of the time, we make choices on the various margins that present themselves, with the result that all societies are more or less capitalistic, more or less socialistic, more or less democratic. Nonetheless, these Schumpeterian terms may be helpful in organizing my general argument.

This argument can be succinctly summarized. If we loosely describe socialism in terms of the range and scope of collectivized controls over individual liberty of actions, then “socialism” will survive and be extended. This result will emerge not because collectivization is judged to be more efficient, in some meaningful economic sense, or even because collectivization more adequately meets agreed upon criteria for distributive justice, but rather because only under the aegis of collective control, under “the state”, can individuals escape, evade and even deny personal responsibilities. In short, persons are afraid to be free. As subsequent discussion will suggest, socialism, as a coherent ideology, has lost most of its appeal. But in a broader and more comprehensive historical perspective, during the course of two centuries, the state has replaced God as the father-mother of last resort, and persons will demand that this protectorate role be satisfied and amplified.
“Capitalism”, an unfortunate but widely used term again loosely described in terms of the range and scope for individual liberty of action outside collectivized direction and control, must remain vulnerable to continuing marginal encroachments, and this thrust of change will remain despite possible analytical and empirical evidence that such encroachments signal retrogression along widely recognized success indicators.

“Democracy”, defined broadly enough to include its many institutional variants, will reflect the preferences of the citizenry, who remain largely immune from the findings of science, and the increasing corruption that must necessarily accompany any expanding range of collective-political control will simply be tolerated and ignored. An overarching theme of the whole paper is that the thrust of development will be dictated by “bottoms up” demands rather than by “top down” dictates of an elite.

I shall flesh out this general argument in later sections. Only in the final section of the paper shall I offer a more hopeful alternative to the pessimistic scenario sketched out above. Such an alternative emerges, however, as much from a sense of moral obligation to believe that constructive reform is within the possible as it does from any realistic prognosis of elements which are discernible beneath the surface of that which may be now observed.

2. The Sources of Socialism

There are at least four sources or wellsprings of ideas that motivate extensions in the range and scope of collective controls over the freedom of persons to act as they might independently choose. In the political dialogue these sources are, of course, intermingled, but in philosophical discourse it seems useful to make distinctions. I shall label these four sources as (1) managerial, (2) paternalistic, (3) distributionist and (4) parental. I shall discuss the first three of these four categories in this section. I shall treat the fourth source, that of the parental motivation, separately in Section 3, because I suggest that this source has been relatively neglected by analysts and, more importantly, that it is likely to swamp the other three in influence during the early decades of this new century.

2.1. Managerial socialism

This is the form of socialism that is now dead and buried, both in ideas and in practice, having been “done in” during the last decades of the twentieth century. This is the socialism that is defined as the collective ownership and control of the means of production, and which involves efforts at centralized command and direction of a national economy as institutionalized through a central planning authority. It is now almost universally acknowledged that the motivating ideas here were based on scientific-intellectual errors of major proportions – errors summarized under Hayek’s (1988) rubric of “fatal