

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Introduction to "Teaching (About) Socialism"

by Paul Lauter



WALTER CRANE, "A GARLAND FOR MAY DAY 1895", WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

“What is Socialism?” asked the governor, and would not stay for an answer. Though he added, as he walked away, “And who cares anyway?”

We do. So do millions of other human beings who in their daily lives see what a changed organization of their society might mean for themselves and their families. But that’s very abstract. It is not our intent here to provide the multiple answers that would be necessary to begin answering that initial question about what people mean when they talk about “socialism.” As the essays in this cluster illustrate, “socialism” means, as it always has, many differing things to different people.

For some, socialism amounts to a curse word affixed to some ideas or people one dislikes: “You no-good socialist, you.” But even for those who use “socialist” as a curse, the idea has certain defining features. It is not our intent, however, to summarize a long history or to substitute for the many, many books on the subject. Rather, we look at some of the ways in which teachers approach the subject, ways as varied as the concept of socialism itself.

Why are we doing this? In the first place millions of people in the U.S.A. and elsewhere, who think of themselves or others close to them as “socialists,” welcome the opportunity to talk historically and philosophically about the concept. Second, even advocates for the dominant economic system in the U.S., capitalism, need to try to understand the dynamics of other societies in our world which designate themselves as “socialist.” And third, from the standpoint of intellectual history, some of the most exciting and consequential debates of the last two centuries have taken place over the question of socialism: its distinctive place in the world of “isms” and how in particular it remains related to, though different from capitalism, communism, anarchism, and other ideas about the organization of human society. In fact, talking about socialism enables us to see more clearly the limitations and especially the inequities of capitalism.

But perhaps most important of all: universities have, at least for the last century in America, been the venues in which we, our students and ourselves, have talked about how we conceive the future. What will that future look like, what will it entail, what needs to change to bring about a future marked not by fire and flood but by hope? To talk about socialism is to talk about possible, even necessary, futures. Which is why the efforts of governors and legislatures to restrict discussion, to avoid examining and reexamining the past, are so counter-productive. To create viable futures depends upon examining the lessons of the past. Even if one concludes that socialism is not the path to a desirable future, it is a conclusion that can be reached or opposed only by the kinds of teaching illustrated in this issue of *Radical Teacher*.

So what definition would help us talk about socialism? The central issue it raises has to do with property. Let’s say a pair of shoes. Most adults “own” a pair of shoes—that is, they are ours to put on when we wish, we don’t share them with others, and we probably chose the color and style. Likely we purchased them at a store that is

“owned” by someone or by a group of people. They probably lease the space from a landlord who “owns” the building or at least the storefront, and the store has (“owns”) a supply of shoes from which customers can choose. Those shoes came, directly or indirectly, from a manufacturer, who has them made using machines that his or her company “owns” or rents. Socialism has very little to say about such commonplace forms of property, though some socialists might begin to ask whether such a manufacturer, which “owns” many machines and hires many workers, should be privately “owned.” Or should the machines and the materials (leather, plastic) they work on be “owned” by those who do the work, or by the state, or some other entity instead—as in American capitalism—by an individual or a group of stockholders? Somewhere between an individual pair of shoes owned by a person and a manufacturer who produces thousands or even millions of pairs of shoes, the question of “ownership” begins to get complicated.

That will quickly be seen if we think not of shoes but of cars. Making, distributing, selling, buying, maintaining a car are obviously much more complicated processes with a greater impact on the society. Individuals or families “own” cars. But the machinery and the processes that produce and distribute cars are in the U.S.A. privately held. That is to say, these processes under capitalism are organized in such a way as to produce profits, which flow to the owner or stockholders. These processes are not generally organized to increase the income of the actual workers who build cars, or to significantly reduce the cost to those who buy cars, objectives which advocates of socialism would favor. This is obvious enough. What is less obvious are the cultural and social consequences of this profit-maximizing way of organizing the economy. A cultural imperative of today’s capitalism is, in fact, to privatize as many institutions as possible: not only the tools of communication, like “public” radio or newspapers—which have long been private—but also schools, hospitals, the production of energy, places to live or assemble, pensions (remember those?). Today you privatize health insurance, calling it “Medicare Advantage”; tomorrow you privatize Social Security, calling it “Retirement Advantage.” To whose advantage?

Privatizing profit—that is, ownership—creates an increasingly large gap between the income of workers and that of owners. Disparities in income and wealth play out in the kinds of lives most people actually live, including where they can live and how, the schooling and health care they receive, how they can shop and commute, the quality of their daily lives. But also, the private profit system emphasizes a culture of insistent individualism; it gives owners the authority to do what they will with what is defined as “their” property—think Twitter. And, in so exerting control, these owners significantly exercise power over the lives of those they employ. The owner can, after all, fire the worker. Or, as someone Steve Goldsmith worked with in a seventies steel mill put it: “You either own the motherfucker or you work for it.”

To say this in a perhaps milder way, differences between capitalism and socialism have not only to do with “ownership”—that is, economics—but with culture: who decides what is made, how and where it is created, by whom, for whom. And under what circumstances. Those

who favor socialism have different answers to such implicit questions than those offered by capitalist culture. Socialists' answers are based on a quite different basic concept—not private ownership but solidarity among equals. One might argue—as Raymond Williams has done—that the distinction between individual privatization of property and forms of collective control marks the fundamental difference between capitalism and socialism as systems for organizing society.

One major feature of capitalism in America, and in other capitalist nations, is to substitute consumerism for ownership. You may not own the “engines of the economy” but you can at least buy the products—shoes, cars, phones—those engines produce. That those engines are quite productive, no one would deny. Whether people really need what they produce—like endless packs of Camels, carbon-spewing diesel engines, the very latest app—remains quite another question. Who decides? American capitalism argues that consumers decide by virtue of how they spend their money. Socialists might argue that such choices are, in practice, heavily constrained—as, for example, by the lack of clean, comfortable, and efficient public transit that, in a city like Los Angeles, pushes people into private cars. And that real choices should be determined not by private decisions of “owners” but by public—i.e., political—contests over public priorities. Do we “need” Artificial Intelligence? Or Lamborghinis?

Another characteristic of capitalism is to hide the actual costs of the products being produced. The recent push for electric cars has made clear that we—all of us—through taxes and other fiscal devices pay for many of the costs—highways, charging stations, parking arrangements—that never appear on the bill of sale for a car you might purchase. What if some portion of such necessary costs were to appear in the sale price? Would that shift the cultural desire to consume the products being rapidly churned out for the profit of private “owners”? It isn't that socialists wish to limit what people can consume; rather, socialists argue that the true price of an item needs to be clear to consumers long before they invest their limited resources in buying it. For wealthy owners, the price of a private jet, a yacht, or a Lamborghini doesn't matter much; but that is not the case for most of us, as individuals or as part of a society. As individuals, we are limited by our personal resources. But also, as a society, we need to be able to decide democratically how to invest our society's limited resources. That is perhaps the central idea of socialism: let the people decide.

At this point, at least some of our readers will have begun to ask: what relationships need to be discussed regarding socialism and race and gender discrimination, which are, after all, among the most conflicted areas of action in today's education, politics, and media? This is a particularly strained issue because, historically, at least some advocates of socialism have argued that achieving a socialist society would, in and of itself, lead to eliminating racism, sexism, and other forms of bias. Would it were so easy. One could devote more than one issue of a magazine

like *Radical Teacher* to how race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and other forms of inequality intersect with the discriminatory class structure of capitalism. Indeed, a whole area of intellectual endeavor, termed intersectionality, has been devoted to that task. That task, as a number of the articles in this cluster illustrate, is one major problem that any teacher will face in discussing the changes proposed for or entailed by a socialist reconstruction of culture. No one has a formula, in fact, for teasing out the multiple threads that weave the fabric of bigotry and inequality. Even those who would bar classroom discussion of sex and gender and race acknowledge by their very efforts the centrality of precisely such discussions to students' educational enlightenment.

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But this much is certain: to “teach about socialism” entails teaching about often bitterly contested histories and current actions regarding sex, race, gender, religion, and ethnicity. To anyone wishing to command “thou shalt not teach X,” we project an image of Heinrich Himmler, who said: “The best political weapon is the weapon of terror. Cruelty commands respect. Men may hate us. But we don't ask for their love; only for their fear.” No. Now and forever.

The Governor might not stay for an answer. But the answers, like the questions, continue to emerge from the everyday experiences of students and teachers throughout this and thousands of other classrooms across our haunted globe.

*This issue of *Radical Teacher* was edited by Susan O'Malley, Paul Lauter, Michael Bennett, and Mary Ann Clawson.

Paul Lauter retired as Allan K. and Gwendolyn Miles Smith Professor of Literature after 26 years at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. He has served as President of the American Studies Association (of the United States) and he remains General Editor of the groundbreaking *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Lauter's most recent books include *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park*, an edited volume with Ann Fitzgerald titled *Literature, Class, and Culture*, and a *Blackwell Companion to American Literature and Culture*. New projects have included an edited collection of essays on American working-class literature with Nick Coles (Cambridge, 2017) and an account of the impact of 60s activism on education, politics, and culture, *Our Sixties: An Activist's History* (Rochester, 2020). He remains active with *Radical Teacher* and in the Vietnam Peace Commemoration Committee. He and Doris Friedensohn provided one of the essays in the collection *Gray Love*.



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