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Review

Heaven on Earth: The Rise and Fall of Socialism
by Joshua Muravchik

reviewed by
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There are, to be sure, intelligent right-wing critiques of socialism, as both concept and practice. Joshua Muravchik's *The Rise and Fall of Socialism*, however, does not constitute such a critique. Its greatest failing is that it simply has nothing new to say, and as is to be expected, what it does have to say is largely wrong.

Supposedly, Joshua Muravchik is to be taken seriously because he comes from a socialist family and he was the national chairman of the youth section of the Socialist Party, USA, from 1968 until 1973. But Muravchik's SP was a quite different animal than it was in the days of Eugene V. Debs, dominated as it was by supporters of the Vietnam War. Anti-Communism had become the sole motivating factor for "socialists" of Muravchik's stripe, hence their general move toward neoconservatism was perfectly predictable. Like his erstwhile comrades from the former SP (now inaccurately calling itself "Social Democrats USA"), Muravchik has moved from anti-Communism to a wholesale rejection of all strands of socialism. His understanding of "socialism" largely reduces it to a notion of state- (or communal colony-) driven social engineering to achieve earthly perfection. There have always been what the American Marxist Hal Draper called "the two souls of socialism": that of "enlightened" elites autocratically seeking to create "rational" societies, and that of ordinary people working toward a world where all institutions are accountable and socially-produced wealth is democratically controlled by those who create it. Muravchik sees only elites, and the "other soul" of socialism is left unexamined. Do not expect to find an index entry for "workers' self-management" in this book.

Little of what Muravchik says about Gracchus Babeuf or Robert Owen is controversial. Babeuf, as Draper once wrote, spearheaded the idea of the

Educational Dictatorship of benevolent anti-capitalists. Owen was also elitist, but Muravchik is considerably easier on him because he was a non-revolutionary who “recognized that there was no need to seize power. Endowed with some land and capital, socialists could form their own communities.” Commenting on the failure of Owen’s utopian society, New Harmony—and, later in the book, the Israeli kibbutzim—Muravchik offers the traditional “socialism goes against human nature” canard: “If men were angels then an economy might succeed without selfish incentives, but if men were angels it would not matter whether the economy succeeded since they would have no material needs.” Whatever relevance this may have to the socialism of utopian colonists, it is irrelevant as a critique of *political* democratic socialism, which has always acknowledged the importance of “selfish” incentives under conditions of (relative) scarcity. Men and women are indeed not angels, and among capitalism’s problems is that it encourages them to be devils: the market encourages every individual to regard and treat all others as means to earn his or her living, just as it compels every firm to act as if it were the center of the universe, never mind the “externalities.”

Muravchik’s analysis of Marx and Engels similarly lacks depth. Besides attributing the phrase “property is theft” to “Marxism”—it was the anarchist forefather Pierre Joseph-Proudhon who coined it—he rehashes the controversy of Marx’s use of anti-Semitic language, specifically the stereotype of Jews as merchant-hucksters. Muravchik fails to mention that the language of Part II of Marx’s *On the Jewish Question* followed the view of the Jews’ role given in an essay *On the Money System* which had just been written by Moses Hess, one of the progenitors of Zionism. Subsequent Zionists used similar phraseology.¹ Marx supported legal equality and civil rights for Jews; his analysis was that Jews were essentially a commercial class within medieval Europe, and the Jewish religion was an ideology reflecting the outlook of this class. While it is certainly true that Marx wrote terrible things in his personal letters to Engels, such as his derision of German socialist leader Ferdinand Lassalle as a “Jewish nigger,” even as he publicly opposed black slavery in the United States, this merely proves that Marx was, in fact, a nineteenth century European. There was nothing anti-Semitic in the *politics* of Marx and Engels—unless one considers atheism to be objectively anti-Semitic, and even then, Marx opposed the attempt by Mikhail Bakunin and his followers to make atheism an official doctrine of the International Workingmen’s Association. Whatever Marx’s personal failings, the movement that took his name was in no way anti-Semitic. August Bebel famously attacked anti-Semitism as “the socialism of fools”; Karl Kautsky denounced New

Testament authors for demonizing the Jews and inciting hatred against them as the murderers of Christ in his book, *The Foundations of Christianity*; Lenin wrote “it is not the Jews who are the enemies of the working people” but “the capitalists of all countries.”²

Muravchik claims that Marx and Engels “reconnected socialism to the thrill of violence”—as if they ever supported violence for its own sake, or ever said that countries which were sufficiently democratic and non-militarized might achieve socialism by peaceful means. He dismisses *Capital* as “ponderous” and “blather”; one wonders what the noted conservative economist Joseph Schumpeter saw in it. (Of course, Schumpeter could understand the difference between use-value and exchange-value; Muravchik is confounded by such stuff. Then again, he terms class struggle to be “high theory,” i.e., not real.)

He attacks the duo for seeing themselves as “leaders of the proletariat”—never part of Marx and Engels’s self-description—despite their lack of working class roots. Indeed, this is a frequent theme in Muravchik’s book: real workers always become, at the most, reformist social democrats, while revolutionaries are always from the affluent classes (this former member of the American SP seems to know nothing of Eugene Debs’s background) and socialism itself is ultimately an ideology imported into the working class by intellectuals from outside it. Irony of ironies, Muravchik’s view is a sort of inverted Trotskyism: it is socialism, not ordinary reformism, which represents the influence of “alien class forces” on the proletariat! Missing in all this is any acknowledgement of the commitment by Marx and Engels to “winning the battle of democracy,” as *The Communist Manifesto* puts it, or any examination of their role in transforming socialism from a doctrine of wealthy colony-founders and secret conspirators to a doctrine of working-class self-emancipation from exploitation. A serious critique of Marx and Engels would comment on their real flaws: their denigration of the role of moral values and individual rights in promoting socialist goals and their belief that an abundant communist society would transcend the need to deliberate politically about its economic priorities. Instead, Muravchik merely offers the conservative same-old same-old.

Muravchik is far nicer to Eduard Bernstein, who embraced the goals of “more political and social legislation, better pay and working conditions” while abandoning the idea of a socialist “final goal.” While in retrospect, Bernstein’s rejection of orthodox Marxist teleology was correct, the ultimate

result of the logic of Bernstein's politics has lately been turned against its own reformist ends. For if the logic of Bernsteinian social democracy has been, as Stephen Eric Bronner puts it, "the achievement of incremental reforms through calculable compromises with the party as broker,"³ the role of social democracy is now, in our age of capitalist globalization, at best to polish the sharpest edges of corporate power—a role embraced by Tony Blair, whom Muravchik praises as an "undertaker" of socialism. Similarly, Clement Atlee gets off easy because he was a gradualist social democrat, though still deluded about the ostensible benefits of public ownership. The difficulties of the Atlee government and, decades later, the sudden about-face of the radical-reformist Mitterand government of France supposedly illustrate the folly of socialist interference in the market. In reality, they are simply examples of the perennial dilemma that socialist governments face: the specter of capital flight, the constraints imposed by the need for continued private investment.

The twentieth century's exemplar of the radical-democratic "other soul" of socialism, Rosa Luxemburg, is dismissed by Muravchik as a "child of privilege" whose mantra was "the spontaneity of the masses," an oft-stated myth. Lenin, of course, is demonized, and while Lenin's thought and political practice deserves sharp criticism, Muravchik mostly offers the traditional fallacies, claiming that the Bolshevik revolution was a mere coup d'état and attributing all its tragedies to Leninism's innate evil and nothing to the civil war in which the Bolsheviks were fighting a full scale invasion by fourteen different states.⁴ Lenin—who supposedly ordered "tens of thousands of deaths," though no proof is offered—gets blamed not only for Stalinism but also for fascism because of his supposed similarities with Mussolini, a former member of the Italian Socialist Party; the Fascists supposedly believed themselves the "true heirs" of Lenin despite their anti-Marxism. Muravchik goes so far as to claim that "Mussolini's rule rested far more on popular support than Lenin's." All he proves in his chapter on fascism is that the "logic" of anti-internationalist anti-capitalism leads in fascist directions.⁵ And while few will disagree with Muravchik's assessment of the bureaucratically-directed "African socialism" of the late Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere, he takes no notice that even Tanzania has suffered much less than some of its neighbors who never strayed from the World Bank/IMF orthodoxy, such as Rwanda and Burundi. The "free market" has devastated postcolonial Africa. Capitalism has failed Africa as surely as has "Ujamaa."

The heroes of Muravchik's book are Samuel Gompers and George Meany, for their role in making America "impervious to socialism." "Pure and simple

unionism,” Gompers style, supposedly represented “true” trade unionism uncorrupted by middle-class socialist intellectuals who cared nothing for “meliorating the immediate conditions of the workers.” The historic opposition of Gompers’s American Federation of Labor to the inclusion of women, blacks, Mexican Americans, Chinese Americans, or most unskilled laborers in the labor movement is ignored, as is the autocratic nature of the unionism that he consolidated. Meany is praised for being an enthusiastic Cold Warrior who purged Communists from American unions and “rid[ding] the movement of racial discrimination.” The truth is that Meany opposed the historic March on Washington in 1963, and whatever efforts he did put toward anti-racist measures—such as lobbying for the 1965 Civil Rights Bill—were done in order to stave off criticisms for having done little in the past; he was far more interested in fighting Communists (and left critics) than fighting racists. Muravchik, of course, identifies with Meany’s support of the Vietnam War and his animosity toward the peace movement (Meany once denounced peaceniks as “fags”). He glosses over the merger of the foreign operations of the AFL-CIO with the counterintelligence sections of the CIA and their reactionary consequences both in Latin America and at home. He repeats the falsehood that Meany molded the labor movement “into a mighty force in American life.”

The truth is that, as Paul Buhle writes, labor’s support for U.S. imperialism “paid virtually all of its [job-creating] benefits in the short run, and to a relatively select proportion of working people. Rather than reproducing union loyalty, the defense-linked rise of Sun Belt industry created large pockets of white working class conservatism, just as big-ticket construction of suburbs reinforced racial boundaries and in several different ways greatly diminished prospects of union democracy. The environmental recklessness of everything-for-production, taken with hypocritical race policies and a staggering indifference to the expanding clerical (especially female) sectors of the workforce, made the labor movement increasingly unpalatable and unsuccessful as time went on.”⁶ The weakness of the U.S. labor movement today is the legacy of Cold War business unionism. To this, Muravchik is indifferent; it is, after all, working class conservatism that he supports, or more precisely working class support for the “American counter-model” to socialism. As the Stalinists of yesteryear saw the USSR or China as the Vanguard Country, so Muravchik sees America as the Vanguard, the envy of the world. No, America has “not always been loved,” but its imperialism is only “supposed.” Given how many people around the world currently see the

U.S. as the world's main danger to peace, the publication of such comments could not have been more ill timed.

Muravchik sees the dying out of the Israeli kibbutzim as the final nail in socialism's coffin. But the kibbutzim, regardless of their adoption of the formula "to each according to their needs" (an impossibility under conditions of scarcity) or adoption of communal childrearing (not much of a priority outside of utopian colonies), were hardly pure institutions. In 1964, ninety-two percent of kibbutzim were affiliated to companies which sold goods produced for a profit. This profit ended up in the hands of companies such as Koor (a major company of construction and manufacturing company) and AMPAL (American Israel Corporation, a finance company that directed U.S. capital investment in Israel), not Israeli workers. During the 1960s, more than fifty percent of kibbutz labor was wage labor, not voluntary labor, with the "dirty jobs" performed by foreign Jewish volunteers. This is not to mention the kibbutzim's role in helping the Haganah army to drive out Arab inhabitants who had not already fled, confiscating their land, and later destroying the remaining houses—not exactly behavior exemplifying proletarian internationalism.⁷ And the increasing social inequality in Israel, mirroring that in the U.S., goes unmentioned by Muravchik.

Muravchik's book ends with a return to the theme of socialism-as-religion, stating that in contrast to traditional religion, socialism "lacks any internal code of conduct to limit what believers may do. The socialist narrative turned history into a morality play without the morality." Democratic socialism, he says, is a contradiction in terms; socialism is inevitably coercive. Of course, capitalism is coercive—it is based upon the coercion of market forces, backed up by state power. History has shown that capitalism is compatible with the most coercive possible governments, including ones that claim to be "socialist." Capitalism is itself innately authoritarian. But the whole point of socialism, when it has not been hijacked by authoritarians, is not the elite engineering of the "New Man," but the full democratization of political and economic power; indeed, the end of power itself as the organizing principle of social life.⁸ This is the core of the "other soul" of socialism. It is still worth fighting for.

Notes

¹See Hal Draper, "Marx and the Economic-Jew Stereotype," in *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution, Vol.1: State and Bureaucracy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977), pp. 591-608.

²V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 29 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972) p. 252.

³Stephen Eric Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*, 2nd Edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), p. 65.

⁴"With the country isolated within the international community, facing economic collapse and internal revolts, it was no wonder that the Bolsheviks should have become obsessed with unity, discipline, economic efficiency, and the administrative centralization of power." Bronner, *ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

⁵Muravchik argues that Nazism did not differ from traditional socialisms in its "virulence against despised peoples," citing Marx's desire for the "annihilation" of "Croats, Pandurs, Czechs and similar scum." The context of those comments is the revolutionary upsurge of 1848, when on the promise of national autonomy (limited self-government)—and with the backing of Tsarist Russia—the Czechs, Croats, Slovenians and Ukrainians sided with the Hapsburg monarchy to smash the revolts of the Polish and Hungarian nationalists and the democrats of Vienna. Marx and Engels opposed the "principle of nationalities" (promulgated by Napoleon) as a doctrine that falsely claimed that all nations had the equal historical, geographical, political and industrial conditions for a viable independence. This doctrine was being used to justify the division and occupation of Poland and to incite the Serbs, Croats, Ukrainians, Slovaks, and Czechs. Marx and Engels supported the right of the great European nations to independence, but nationalities that were not struggling against imperial rule could claim no such right. They would never become nations and embark upon their own path of independent democratic development. Instead, civilization would be imposed on them by the great historic nations. A Darwinian view, perhaps, but not analogous to Nazi doctrine.

⁶Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), p. 2.

⁷See Benny Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁸This is how Ralph Miliband puts it in *Socialism for a Sceptical Age* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 57.

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