

Abundance is Feasible

In his latest book, *The Economics of Feasible Socialism*, (published last year by George Allen and Unwin) Alec Nove, who has made his reputation as an expert on the Russian economy, sets out his ideas on the kind of "socialism" he believes to be "feasible" within "the lifetime of a child already conceived". His sights are not set very high, as the only alternative to private capitalism that he sees as possible in this period is the sort of milk-and-water state capitalism that might be advocated by a Labour or even an SDP supporter. In fact Nove even recognises that there would continue to be "extremists" in his "socialism" who would denounce it as state capitalism and urge workers to continue fighting for higher wages and better conditions. Indeed there would.

But it is not this part of his book that is interesting but rather the first chapter entitled "The Legacy of Marx" in which he attempts to show that socialism as a moneyless, wageless, stateless world commonwealth is not feasible, at least not in the next 70 or so years. He declares his position right from the first page:

I feel increasingly ill-disposed towards those latter-day Marxists who airily ascribe all the world's evils to "capitalism", dismiss the Soviet experience as irrelevant, and substitute for hard thinking an image of a post-revolutionary world in which there would be no economic problems at all (or where any problems that might arise would be handled smoothly by the "associated producers" of a world commonwealth).

Nove seems to have in mind people like Sweezy, Mandel, Bettelheim and Bertell Ollman but clearly socialists also fall into the category of those towards whom he is ill-disposed, even if we are not exactly "latter-day" Marxists. As a matter of fact we are the only group of people consistently defending the point of view Nove sets out to demolish since the people mentioned above basically agree with him that all that is feasible immediately is not a moneyless society, but some sort of "transitional society" lasting for up to two generations during which money, wages, the state and the rest would have to continue to exist.

Nove summarises Marx's position as follows:

Marx appears to have believed that technical progress already made under capitalism had fundamentally solved the problem of production, but that the shackles imposed on the forces of production by the capitalist system prevented "the absolute development of social productivity of labour", such as would make possible "continual relative overproduction". Marx is well aware that needs expand with rising production. . . Evidently there would still be scarcity in relation to needs at first, but, it seems, not for long.

Let us define abundance as a sufficiency to meet requirements at zero price, leaving no reasonable person dissatisfied or seeking more of anything (or at least of anything re- producible). This concept plays a crucial role in Marx's vision of socialism/communism. Let us observe the consequences of - and then consider the consequences of not - accepting this assumption.

Abundance removes conflict over resource allocation, since by definition there is enough for everyone, and so there are no mutually exclusive choices, no opportunity is forgone and therefore there is no opportunity-cost. The golden age, a communist steady-state equilibrium, will have been reached. Gradual change, growth, will be simple and painless. The task of planning becomes one of simple routine; the role of economics is virtually eliminated. There is then no reason for various individuals and groups to compete, to take possession for their own use of what is freely available to all. . . If other goods were as easily and freely available as water is in Scotland, then new human attitudes would develop: acquisitiveness would wither away; property rights, and crimes related to property, would also vanish, not because the citizens would have become "good" by reading Marxist books but because acquisitiveness would have lost all purpose. In other words, Marx did not say that, under socialism, there would be no conflicts over the allocation of scarce resources (oil, fish, iron ore, stockings, or whatever) but that these and other resources would not be scarce.

Apart from one or two snide expressions, this is not too bad as an outline of Marx's position, indeed of the general socialist position (since Marx did not invent the idea of socialism but merely joined an already existing movement, helping to clarify its ideas). If anything, it errs by painting too rosy a picture of socialism. For instance, while it is true that in socialism we will be able to meet everybody's material needs, it is not the case that there would be "no mutually exclusive choices" in socialism.

A decision to produce so much of some reproducible good will indeed not be a decision to produce less or none of some other good since resources will be adequate to produce both goods in the desired quantities, but this does not apply in the case of land. A piece of land can only be used for one purpose - build a factory on it and it can't then be used as a playing field - and this will continue to be the case in socialism. Such decisions over land use will have to be settled consciously and democratically in the light of the preferences of those concerned.

Nove, however, has an interest in painting socialism as a problem-less "golden age" so as to be able to denounce it as "millenarian", "utopian", "far-fetched", "never-never land", "religious", to mention just some of the terms of abuse he employs against socialism in the course of his book. He is however honest enough to admit that to prove his case he must show that abundance, as "supply balancing demand at zero price" or as we would prefer to express it where resources are sufficient to meet human needs, does not exist and could not be made to exist within "the lifetime of a child already conceived".

"It is my contention", he writes, "that abundance in this sense is an unacceptable assumption":

Over a fifty-year worldwide perspective, even on optimistic political, geological and technical assumptions, it is surely far-fetched to imagine that

there will be enough for all at zero price. Saturation of demand for particular products is possible, which might bring them into the same category as water in Scotland. But is it conceivable, can it be seriously envisaged, that the world's citizenry would be able to take whatever they wanted (even "reasonably" wanted) from the amply supplied public stores. . ?

As evidence for this view he can do no more than come up with such discredited prophets of doom as the Club of Rome and the Brandt Commission and a reference to starving millions in India and China! This won't do and is unworthy of anyone who is seriously interested in investigating whether the world's people can avoid millions starving to death and millions more being killed in wars and other conflicts such as will be the case if socialism and abundance are not feasible and capitalism and scarcity the only possibility for the next two or more generations.

The evidence is overwhelmingly against Nove's contention that the world's resources, and humanity's knowledge of how to use them, are not sufficient to adequately feed, clothe, shelter and otherwise provide for the needs of its population. We could quote from any number of technologists, agronomists, nutritionists and other scientists, but will confine ourselves to quoting W. David Hopper writing in the special issue of the Scientific American on "Food and Agriculture" that came out in September 1976:

It is important to recognise that the world's food problem does not arise from any physical limitation of potential output or any danger of unduly stressing the "environment". The limitations on abundance are to be found in the social and political structures of nations and in the economic relations among them. The unexploited global food resource is there, between Cancer and Capricorn. The successful husbandry of that resource depends upon the will and the actions of men.

So abundance already exists potentially today and it is clear that every new technological development makes the case for socialism even stronger. Nove is on especially weak ground since he contends not only that abundance could not be brought about today, but also that it is unlikely to be able to be brought into existence within the next fifty years. But technical development will continue during this period and two important advances in particular can be expected.

First, the practical application of nuclear fusion in electricity generating stations (thus providing virtually limitless energy) and the discovery of an efficient system of storing electricity (which will allow, for instance, electricity generated in off-peak periods to be stored for later use as well as allowing other forms of energy such as the sun's rays and the wind, to be converted into electricity and stored in that form). Arthur C. Clarke in the second (1973) edition of his Profiles of the Future estimated that the first of these advances would be achieved in the 1990s and the second towards the end of the 1980s.

We hasten to add that we are not suggesting that these advances in themselves will automatically bring about socialism nor that socialism could not

be established without them. We are merely pointing out that the abundance is not at all "far-fetched" as Nove claims, and certainly not in the 50-70 years to come.

In his discussion of individual consumption Nove only sees two possibilities: either individual choice expressed through purchasing power ("voting with the rouble" as the Russian economic reformers to whom he is sympathetic put it) or some bureaucratic decision as to what people should be given to consume. He adds that even if the decision about what people should be supplied with for their individual consumption were taken democratically, this still would not be superior to the market since why should 5 per cent decide what the other 49 per cent should consume? So why not leave the choice, he asks, up to the individual? Why not indeed, and this is precisely what will happen in socialism, as Nove himself vaguely recognises:

...no better method for arriving at consumer choice is known than that of allowing the consumer to choose, and (save on farfetched assumptions of "abundance") this means choosing by using his or her purchasing power, by buying in shops. . .

In other words, if the assumption of abundance is not regarded as "far-fetched" (which, as we have seen it is not) then there is an even "better method" of ensuring individual consumer choice than voting with money: free access, where there is no regulation of consumption and where, as Nove puts it, "everyone takes from the common stores the amount that he needs, and he determines what he needs".

As can be seen, Nove is attacking socialism as we (and Marx) understand it. His arguments are very weak, but the important thing is that people should have begun to discuss socialism - as a moneyless, wageless, tradeless world commonwealth - as at least a theoretical possibility. This helps get the idea of socialism into circulation and when people realise that abundance is not far-fetched but, on the contrary, within our reach, then they can realise that a world of free access, without either bureaucratic planning or a market economy, is perfectly feasible.

In this paradoxical way then Nove has unintentionally done socialism a favour.

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