

LIBERALISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE



RAWLSIAN ANTI-CAPITALISM AND
LEFT SOLIDARITY

BY

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Rawlsian Anti-Capitalism and Left Solidarity*

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Introduction

Two prominent traditions of leftist political thought are socialism and left-liberalism. Though these traditions are neither exhaustive of leftism nor exclusive of each other, they operate with considerable independence from – and often, antagonism to – one another. This is true both in academic contexts and in broader sites of conversation and activism.¹ In

* I thank Georgi Gardiner, Douglas Garthoff, and especially Yannig Luthra for extremely valuable comments on an earlier draft of this essay. I also thank two anonymous reviewers for *Philosophy & Public Issues*; their thoughtful, constructive feedback also prompted important and necessary improvements to the essay.

¹ There are of course many exceptions here, including David Schweickart (1993) and John Roemer (1994).

this essay, I provide a summary explanation of how in present political conditions the broad aims of these two traditions are consonant and complementary, also of how each is strengthened and enriched by engagement with the other.² The essay thus works toward remedying the separation and opposition of these traditions by articulating commitments common to both and characteristic of the type of leftism needed today. It also helps explain why some political orientations and policy proposals, notably including meritocracy and universal basic income, are poor bases for left solidarity.

The principal intellectual figure of the socialist tradition is of course Karl Marx, while in our context the principal intellectual figure of the liberal tradition is John Rawls. In emphasizing the potential for solidarity among (some) socialists and (some) liberals, the essay also emphasizes consonance of themes between these two great political theorists. I focus attention especially on Rawls's anti-capitalism, which – notwithstanding the important contributions of Samuel Freeman and William Edmundson – has not received due consideration.³

One important aspect of Rawls's anti-capitalism, rightly emphasized by Freeman, is his strong association between capitalism and utilitarianism. Neither entails the other, but capitalist economic systems and utilitarian philosophy share an instrumental understanding of rationality, emphasis on putative measures of welfare, aggregation as the measure of group welfare, and the aim to grow welfare thus putatively measured and aggregated. These features leave utilitarians poorly situated to diagnose and criticize capitalism's most fundamental failings: that

² On this broad point it may help to compare and contrast this essay with Simone Chambers (2012).

³ See Freeman (2011, 2013) and Edmundson (2017).

capitalist elections are exercises in consumer choice and that capitalist markets treat human labor as a mere commodity. I discuss affinities between capitalism and utilitarianism in Section 3C below.⁴

Rawls's anti-capitalism is not limited to his opposition to utilitarianism, however, and my discussion does not focus on affinities between these positions. In what follows I articulate a left position comprising three core positive commitments and three core critical commitments. I do so with special emphasis on anti-capitalist features of Rawls's view, since these mutually support themes that are more prominent within the socialist tradition. The aim is not to assess the relative significance of the two traditions, but rather to emphasize their consonance, despite disagreement on some important matters. Articulating this consonance is intended to help encourage sympathy and solidarity between those attracted to these respective traditions. It is intended also to enhance the appeal of each by incorporating themes more fully developed in the other.⁵

My aim in this essay thus also differs from that of Edmundson, who argues a Rawlsian conception of justice requires a socialist economic macrostructure.⁶ In my judgment Edmundson argues effectively that a socialist economic system

⁴ While I will not pursue the issue here, I think this relation is important not only for understanding leading intellectual justifications for capitalism, but also for understanding the persistent influence of utilitarianism. In my view the doctrine has been multiply refuted in both ethical theory and political philosophy, and yet it lives on as a "zombie doctrine". For classical refutations see Rawls 1971, Bernard Williams 1973, and Samuel Scheffler 1982.

⁵ For early discussions of the relationship between Rawls and Marx, see Richard Miller 1974 and Arthur DiQuattro 1983; for a more recent discussion see Daniel Brudney 2013.

⁶ See Edmundson 2017, especially Chapter 10.

more securely satisfies the requirements of justice as Rawls understands these, provided this socialist economic system can gain purchase in a society's public political culture. Edmundson does not discuss at length, however, what I take to be both the greatest challenge to his primary conclusion and the most likely reason Rawls did not elaborate a socialist position: that the ideas needed to sustain socialism – even a liberal socialism of the sort Rawls views as compatible with justice – might be sufficiently alien from a society's public political culture that a socialist socioeconomic system might be less stable within that political culture, notwithstanding the greater relative stability of such a system within a different culture.⁷ This concern is perhaps most pressing in Rawls's home country of the United States, where the socialist tradition has been marginalized.

In my view, which I conjecture accords with Rawls's views of these matters, we do not now know whether socialism is in that way alien to the political cultures of the United States or other developed economies. Accordingly my recommendation is neither to advocate for socialism nor to advocate against it, but instead to advocate for major institutional reforms to realize what Rawls (unfortunately, given the term's distinct use by Margaret Thatcher) labels a "property-owning democracy".⁸ We should do

⁷ Rawls distinguishes liberal from "command" socialism in Rawls 2001, especially Sections 41-42. As he presents these two socioeconomics systems, both involve societal ownership of the means of production. In a liberal socialist society, Rawls writes, "economic power is dispersed among firms ... [that] carry out their activities within a system of free and workably competitive markets"; he writes further that within a liberal socialism "[f]ree choice of occupation is also assured". See Rawls 2001, 138.

⁸ Rawls provides his fullest account of the socioeconomic system he calls "property-owning democracy" in Rawls 2001, especially Sections 41-42. For further exposition see Martin O'Neill 2009, 2012 and Alan Thomas 2016. See

so not with confidence such a socioeconomic system is most just, however, but instead with the more open-ended attitude that future generations will be better positioned to judge whether to pursue additional major institutional reforms realizing socialism.⁹

Thus the position I articulate here is not opposed to Edmundson’s most important claims, but it refrains from endorsing his claim that Rawlsian justice requires socialism. Nevertheless it agrees with much of the spirit of Edmundson’s book, including in particular his claim that much of the power of Rawls’s work remains latent, despite its enormous influence and the voluminous literature of commentaries it has inspired.¹⁰ The position I articulate here also agrees with both Freeman and Edmundson that, regardless of what we make of socialism as an ultimate political ambition, it is crucial in the current political environment to advance a politics that is full-throated in its critique of capitalism.

I

The Three Positive Commitments

In this section I describe what I take to be the core positive commitments of any adequate leftism today. I do this relatively

also note 34 below, and more generally Section 3. I do not weigh in here on the details of what property-owning democracy consists in, except insofar as is necessary to differentiate it from other socioeconomic types. A relatively generic understanding of the idea suffices for the broad aims of this essay.

⁹ I do endorse, however, Waheed Hussain’s claim that justice requires “democratic corporatism”: workers and other societal stakeholders must have representatives within economic structures that empower them to shape major decisions. For development of this idea see Hussain 2012.

¹⁰ See Edmundson 2017, especially Chapter 3.

briefly, since the most interesting and controversial features of these commitments are best explored in the context of their negative implications. The point of this section is not to fully elaborate, still less to fully defend, the broad leftist position I endorse. It is instead to provide fundamental orientation that helps explain the more controversial negative claims that follow in Section 3.

Many people think they hold leftist political views when in fact they do not, so there can be value in policing the boundaries of leftism. Such policing is not, however, my main ambition. The claims I articulate here are not primarily descriptive; I am interested less in defining leftism as such, and more in enunciating a broad but substantive account of what makes a leftism today worthy of the name. The main conclusion is a prescription about how to approach questions of large-scale socioeconomic structure within today's politics. I also think it important at present to advocate for left solidarity transnationally, but my focus here is on how leftism is best articulated within domestic politics.

1A: Social Egalitarianism

The first and most important positive commitment of leftism is to be democratic, where this involves commitment not only to voting procedures with a broad franchise but also more strongly to creating and sustaining a public political culture that realizes a fundamental *social equality* of all persons.

Such social egalitarianism suffuses the work of both Marx and Rawls. The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* famously declares the ambition to “raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling

class to win the battle for democracy”.¹¹ To the extent Marx and Engels had reservations about democracy, this was because they thought that some societies lack adequate institutions to support democratic reform (so a violent revolution establishing communism might be justified) or because they thought the state itself might eventually “wither away” and become unnecessary.¹²

Regardless of the prospects for improving non-democratic societies using (internally) violent means, the former reservation is moot in the contemporary context. No socialist should advocate large-scale violence in contemporary politics, and no one of any political orientation should think widespread violence is likely to produce anything other than a powerful and anti-progressive reaction.¹³

The latter reservation is not best understood as an importantly antidemocratic strand in Marxian thought, since it is predicated on achievement of democracy’s fundamental goal – the equal social standing of all people – through non-state means. I tend (with Rawls) to doubt that this goal is achievable in that way. I also think future people will be better positioned to judge the issue, however, and furthermore that it is important to maintain solidarity with leftist anarchists within the current political environment. The view I articulate here is thus noncommittal about both the feasibility and the desirability of a stateless society

¹¹ Marx and Engels 1848, 26; and see also Engels 1847. For fuller discussion of the complex role of democracy in Marxian thought, see Richard Wolff 2000.

¹² See Chapter 2 of Engels 1878 and Chapter IX of Engels 1884; see also Marx 1872, 1891.

¹³ I say “widespread” violence so as to remain neutral about whether smaller-scale acts of violence might be justified, and perhaps even constructive, when performed by members of especially harshly oppressed groups in response to ongoing structures of oppression. The main points of this essay do not rely on any particular view about that question.

in the distant future. I help myself to the assumption that in the medium term, however, even anarchists should not advocate abolishing the state.

Rawls's commitment to democracy, in the full-throated sense of social equality of all persons, is absolute bedrock in his view.¹⁴ It is deeper even than his commitment to liberalism, since he justifies core liberal commitments in terms of their necessity to maintain the social equality of genuine democracy, rather than the other way around.¹⁵ The extreme depth of Rawls's commitment to democracy and social equality can be missed in a cursory reading of his work, for he does not attempt to defend democracy directly; indeed he does not even articulate at length the virtues of democratic societies with respect to other political systems. Rawls refrains from such positive defenses of democracy, however, only because he takes a commitment to social equality to be definitional of his enterprise. More specifically, it is only in the context of a public political culture aspiring to democratic equality that Rawls claims his account of justice has purchase.¹⁶

This section should not be taken to imply that Marx and Rawls were in agreement about what an ideal society would look like. Rawls explicitly rejects the aim of creating a communist

¹⁴ See, for example, Rawls 2001, 33-35. For further comment and elaboration on Rawls's egalitarianism, see O'Neill 2008, Andrew Mason 2015, and Christian Schemmel 2015a.

¹⁵ One place where this order of argument is explicit is Rawls 2001, 197. The priority of equal political liberty over economic considerations is a paradigm liberal commitment, and Rawls argues for this claim in part on the ground that it conduces to a better-functioning and more stable democracy; see Lecture VII of Rawls 1993 and Section 30 of Rawls 2001. For discussion see Joshua Cohen 2003.

¹⁶ See, for example, Rawls 2001, 18-38.

society within which the “circumstances of justice” no longer hold.¹⁷ In Rawls’s view reasonable disagreement about what makes life fulfilling will persist in an ideally just society, for example, and human benevolence will always remain limited in its motivational efficacy.¹⁸

IB: Structural Emphasis

The second positive commitment of any leftism worthy of the name is to a *structural* understanding of political and economic systems. One mark of an emphasis on structure is focus on the social milieu against which political action takes place, a milieu that is itself dynamically recreated by that same action.

In Marxian thought there is special emphasis on power structures, including in particular economic power structures. From the beginning, however, Marx and his followers displayed cognizance of the complex interplay between economic power and cultural understandings. Thus Engels famously introduces the term “false consciousness” to denote the internalization by the working classes of cultural understandings inimical to their social empowerment.¹⁹ Later theorists would provide far more detailed accounts of this interplay, while retaining the original

¹⁷ Rawls’s clearest summary account of the circumstances of justice is found in Section 24 of Rawls 2001. See also Section 22 of Rawls 1971, and for the idea’s source see Book III of Hume 1739.

¹⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting these differences between Marx and Rawls be highlighted.

¹⁹ See Engels 1893.

emphasis on structures of power that guide and sustain the evolution of a political culture.²⁰

In Rawls' commitment to structural analysis manifests in his idea of the "basic structure of society", the large-scale institutional framework that constitutes cooperation among citizens at the societal level.²¹ This structure is responsible for securing "background justice", which is justice in the ground rules against which important social transactions like elections and labor markets take place.²² It is to this basic structure that a conception of justice, in Rawls's understanding, in the first instance applies.

Rawls's emphasis on the basic structure of society contrasts with a focus on the pedigree of the status quo. Rawls associates focus on pedigree with Lockean, commonly right-libertarian, political thought.²³ Rawls's emphasis on the basic structure also contrasts with emphasis on the outcomes produced by actions or policies as such, as is prominent in both utilitarian and luck-egalitarian political thought.²⁴

²⁰ Antonio Gramsci 1971 merits special mention; also important is Louis Althusser 1970.

²¹ See Section 2 of Rawls (1971), Lecture VII of Rawls (1993), and Section 4 of Rawls (2001).

²² See Section 14 of Rawls (1971) and Sections 14-16 of Rawls (2001). As Brudney (2013) notes, Rawls thus (like Marx) focuses on the production of goods in his account of distributive justice.

²³ See Section 15 of Rawls (2001). Rawls names Robert Nozick (1974) as an exemplar of this approach; see John Locke (1689) for the historical inspiration.

²⁴ For defenses of luck-egalitarianism see Richard Arneson 2000 and Kok-Chor Tan (2008); for criticisms see Elizabeth Anderson 1999 and Susan Hurley 2001. For an interesting juxtaposition of this piece by Anderson with Edmundson's book, see Kristina Meshelski 2019.

Emphasis on the basic structure of society also contrasts with focus on the attitudes and choices of individuals. In Rawls's approach critiques of social injustice should focus neither on the consumer choices of individuals, for example, nor on the investment decisions or rent-seeking behavior of specific businesses. The background system of rules and understandings that permits and encourages these decisions and behaviors to undermine social equality is instead the focus.

These respective structural emphases are, in my view, importantly complementary. They share a focus on how society is presently constituted, rather than on how it came to be that way. The Marxian emphasis is on the power structures of institutions, and on how these dynamically recreate themselves in an ongoing way. This helps bring out the importance of widespread and effective economic agency, of workers not being vulnerable to exploitation by capitalists. It also helps bring out the importance of energetic agonism in the face of such exploitation, of the need to defeat the interests of would-be exploiters. The Rawlsian emphasis is instead on the fairness of institutions that underlie major social transactions. Rawls also emphasizes the ideas that publicly regulate these institutions, and how these ideas dynamically recreate themselves. While Marx and Rawls are of course not in agreement about all important matters, for the most part the emphasis each provides does not compete with that provided by the other.²⁵ Theorists may disagree on the relative importance of the structural emphases found in Marx and Rawls, but those favoring one should acknowledge that the other provides a helpful accounting of important aspects of political dynamics not as fully developed by the other.

²⁵ Rawls criticizes Marx most explicitly in Section 52 of Rawls 2001.

IC: Transformational Change

The third positive commitment is to a *transformational* understanding of what is needed in the present political circumstances. Unlike the first two commitments, this third commitment is not characteristic of the leftism needed in all historical conditions. At present, however, any left political position should regard society as in need of an overhaul both in its broad socioeconomic institutions and in its broadly animating political ideas.

It perhaps goes without saying that not only Marx in particular but the entire socialist tradition endorses transformational changes to contemporary politics and economics. The core socialist claim is that ownership of the largest-scale means of production, and accordingly the capacity to make society-defining investment decisions, must lie in the hands of the public rather than in the hands of any private individual or association.²⁶ In socialist systems the public must control the “commanding heights” of the economy.²⁷ To achieve this goal would require a radical change from the status quo. At present these means of production are held, and these investment decisions are made, by large corporations.

Talk of “transformational” change opposes incremental approaches to politics and public policy. It also deliberately shoots the gap between leftists who regard themselves as reformers and those who regard themselves as revolutionaries. Reform is necessary but not sufficient, since major changes to

²⁶ For an account of socialism in the context of Rawlsian political thought, again see Edmundson 2017.

²⁷ See Sections 41-42 of Rawls 2001 for Rawls’s notion of “command”, and for further discussion of the idea of “commanding heights” of the economy see Edmundson 2017, especially Chapter 2.

existing power structures are needed to ensure positive reforms are not undone. A revolution in how we think about politics and economics is needed, but not a violent revolution that overthrows the government. Transformation is change not just in extent but also in kind, and the transformation leftists should advocate is toward a non-capitalist economic order; but this talk of transformation need not suggest violence.

Rawls lacks the radical style of many Marxians. In part for this reason, he is sometimes accused – in my view mistakenly – of an insufficiently radical or progressive agenda.²⁸ In my view this accusation is blunted by the fact that Rawls explicitly rejects not only *laissez-faire* but also welfare-state capitalism, also by his contention that we must develop and specify a non-capitalist social system distinct from these.

Rawls regards *laissez-faire* capitalism as a complete non-starter, since it does not even purport to bind the citizenry together into a cooperative unity.²⁹ Its ideology is instead one of competitiveness, extolling rather than lamenting the fact that capitalist economies inevitably produce winners and losers, permitting rather than mitigating the fact that unregulated capitalist economies generate terrible life circumstances for large numbers of citizens. *Laissez-faire* economies also involve minimal investment in public goods, exacerbating the plight of those within them who fare worst.

²⁸ See, for example, Charles Mills 2005. For avowedly radical Rawlsianism, see Anthony Laden 2001.

²⁹ Rawls discusses *laissez-faire* capitalism in Section 41 of Rawls 2001. In Edmundson’s apt paraphrase of Rawls’s critique, “what does not at least aim to realize the two principles will not succeed in doing so”; see Edmundson 2017, 77.

Laissez-faire economic systems furthermore characteristically subject large portions of the population to the tyranny of “private government”.³⁰ People are largely dependent on private enterprises for goods essential to survival, and so are subject to extreme forms of domination in their workplaces. Both the monopolistic tendency of capitalist economies and the strong tendency of monopolies to capture and control the government proceed unchecked within a laissez-faire capitalist regime.

Welfare-state capitalism is a vast improvement over laissez-faire capitalism. Guaranteed retirement income, unemployment insurance, and health insurance greatly improve the prospects of working people in welfare-state systems. Free public education and massive infrastructure projects greatly enhance the opportunities open to citizens in general. Public campaign finance, aggressive antitrust enforcement, and extensive government regulation both to enhance market competition and to protect public goods like clean air and water prevent the worst tyrannies of capitalism’s private governments.³¹

Notwithstanding the world-historical improvements that the welfare state-establishing structural transformations constituted, and notwithstanding the need to defend existing welfare state institutions in a time of re-ascendant monopolism and corporate capture of government, Rawls flatly rejects the welfare state as a potentially just economic system.³² It is crucial to the primary

³⁰ For much more on this idea see Anderson 2017.

³¹ As this list attests, in the United States construction of the welfare state was never completed. Neither the New Deal nor its extensions in the postwar era achieved public health care or campaign finance; indeed the specific reformist route pursued on these matters served only to enhance the influence of large corporations on the lives of the citizenry at large.

³² See Sections 41-42 of Rawls 2001, where Rawls emphasizes the failure of the welfare state to engender reciprocity among citizens. Like publicity, reciprocity

purposes of this paper to consider his reasons for rejecting welfare-state capitalism in some detail, also to expand on these with an eye toward unifying them with socialist grounds for rejecting capitalism. I undertake that task in the following section, using three central negative commitments of the “synthesized” leftism I recommend as an organizational structure.³³

II

The Three Negative Commitments

I begin this section by briefly articulating features of the socioeconomic system Rawls favorably juxtaposes with welfare-state capitalism, property-owning democracy.³⁴ In so doing I elaborate the first negative commitment of this essay’s synthesized leftism, its commitment to antiauthoritarianism. This involves opposition not only to totalitarian or antidemocratic politics, but also opposition to totalitarian and antidemocratic economics.

I then turn to a more controversial negative commitment of this left position, namely its antimeritocracy. Rawls is explicit about his antimeritocratic commitments, and these are crucial to his case for rejecting welfare-state capitalism. Especially

figures in Rawls’s thought both as a consideration in its own right and as a constituent of stability. On Rawls’s conception of stability, see Jon Garthoff 2016.

³³ I use the label “synthesized” because the broad view outlined in this paper synthesizes prominent features of socialism with prominent features of left-liberalism.

³⁴ For more on property-owning democracy, again see Sections 41-42 of Rawls 2001 as well as Freeman 2007, 219-236, Freeman 2013, and Chapter 2 of Edmundson 2017. See also note 8 above.

important is the connection between antimeritocracy and reciprocity. A welfare state does not constitute or express the worth of all citizens by emphasizing the need for each citizen to contribute to political and economic life. It instead emphasizes that citizens are fitting recipients of society's concern.³⁵

The third and most controversial negative commitment is to antiwelfarism. Rawls is explicitly antiwelfarist, but his discussion of the issue focuses mainly on problems of publicity, the difficulty of identifying both when an adequate provision of welfare has occurred and where above that threshold it is permissible to tolerate inequalities for the sake of expanding the total quantity of welfare produced.³⁶ In what follows I go beyond this discussion while remaining in a Rawlsian spirit, emphasizing (like Freeman) the affinities between capitalism and utilitarianism. These affinities are present not only in *laissez-faire* but also in welfare-state capitalism. They are not limited to total and average utilitarianism, moreover, but extend also to restricted versions of utilitarianism. (Restricted utilitarianism rules out as unacceptable, prior to any application of the principle of utility, social arrangements involving either the extreme deprivation of failing to meet basic needs or the extreme domination of slavery or caste-based subordination.³⁷) As I explain below, capitalism and utilitarianism each lack an adequate understanding of the human person as a locus of respect, and so each is unable stably to sustain fully satisfactory social relationships.

³⁵ Brudney 2013 includes illuminating discussion of the distinction between concern and respect in the context of the work of both Marx and Rawls.

³⁶ See Section 38 of Rawls 2001.

³⁷ Rawls defines the "principle of restricted utility" in Section 34 of Rawls 2001, and in the following four sections he argues that his favored conception of justice, justice as fairness, is superior to this principle.

2A: Antiauthoritarianism

The first and perhaps least controversial critical commitment is to be *antiauthoritarian*. This commitment flows directly from the social equality of left politics. This is of course a mark of liberal thought in general, and Rawls is no exception, including especially his placement of political liberties above other goods in his conception of justice.³⁸ As a tradition socialism is more mixed in its attitude toward political liberties, and is also more mixed in its tolerance of strongly centralized economic authorities. With Rawls I assume that for contemporary societies with fully developed economies strongly centralized economic planning is not recommended.³⁹ Thus the only forms of socialism we should seriously consider are ones that are liberal in that they rule out such centralized authority in their socioeconomic arrangements.

Liberalism in this broad sense is relatively uncontroversial, but the antiauthoritarianism of synthesized leftism extends beyond this. This position opposes authoritarian political regimes, to be sure; but it also opposes authoritarianism inside the economic sphere, and further supports increased democratization of the workplace. At a minimum this includes protection of workers' rights to unionize, aggressive antitrust enforcement, and extensive mandatory representation of workers on the boards of large corporations.⁴⁰

All these are important features of property-owning democracy. They distinguish it from welfare-state capitalism by empowering workers and by aggressively resisting monopolies. A

³⁸ See Chapter IV of Rawls 1971, especially Section 39.

³⁹ Rawls briefly discusses command economies, and then dismisses them, in Section 41 of Rawls 2001.

⁴⁰ See Hussain 2012.

property-owning democracy must also have other features not present in welfare-state capitalism, however, if it is to be a candidate for a just economic system. It must include policies of taxation and transfer, for example, beyond what is needed to secure a “social safety net” or “suitable social minimum” for all citizens.⁴¹ The defining feature of property-owning democracy is its broad dispersal of productive assets; the tendency of markets to consolidate economic power requires robust policies of tax and transfer to maintain that dispersal over time.⁴²

Property-owning democracy does not, however, entail mandatory worker ownership of at least a substantial part of large private productive enterprises. Such a requirement would suffice for a socialist regime by any reasonable definition; socialism does not entail all property is owned by the government. Since property-owning democracy is by definition not a socialist economic system, it does not mandate this.

As was indicated in the introductory section, the synthesized left position I articulate here is – like Rawls’s conception of justice – noncommittal regarding whether worker ownership (or management, in the case of public enterprises) of large private productive enterprises is required by justice. Since this

⁴¹ Rawls discusses the “suitable social minimum” in Section 34 of Rawls 2001.

⁴² Edmundson labels this tendency the “fact of domination”; see Edmundson 2017, especially Chapter 3. He also notes the interesting fact that Rawls introduces a notion of “periodicity” with the idea of property-owning democracy, since there must be some interval after which the fact of domination is remedied in a non-socialist system, to maintain broad dispersal of wealth. Edmundson plausibly sees this as an important vulnerability of a property-owning democracy, one that generates publicity and reciprocity issues broadly analogous to those generated by welfare-state capitalism’s need to specify a suitable social minimum. See Edmundson 2017, especially Chapter 10.

requirement is a main tenet of socialism, it may seem to prevent the view from serving as a basis for a left solidarity encompassing socialists. But this is not correct, for in contemporary societies the best route to worker ownership of large private productive enterprises is plausibly to first achieve property-owning democracy. If this is right, then in present conditions socialists too should advocate for institutions of a property-owning democracy in the medium term, even if they do so in the belief that their achievement must be followed by additional efforts to realize socialism.⁴³

The point of remaining noncommittal about socialism in the present context, moreover, is not merely the political goal of enabling a broad coalition that includes both socialists and non-socialists. It is also the epistemic claim, which I think all on the left should accept, that citizens in a property-owning democracy would be much better positioned to know whether socialism is a requirement of justice. The question of socialism is not a matter of mere speculation, but it is one about which we all should recognize our fallibility.

Before leaving the topic of antiauthoritarianism, I must mention the feature of property-owning democracy and liberal democratic socialism that Rawls most emphasizes when arguing for the superiority of these systems to welfare-state capitalism: that they are compatible with realizing the “fair value” of the political liberties. This idea is sometimes glossed as the thought that political liberties must be guaranteed not only in form but in

⁴³ It may help to bear in mind here that, as Nien-hê Hseih emphasizes, it is not sufficient to realize property-owning democracy that there be widespread dispersal of wealth. Available work must also be meaningful, and workers must have significant say about the conditions of their work. For further development of these points see Hseih 2012, and see also Hussain 2012.

substance, also as the thought that citizens must not only have liberties but be in a position to exercise them meaningfully.

These glosses are helpful, but they do not capture the full idea of the fair value of the political liberties. It may help, in explaining why, to compare the political liberties under laissez-faire capitalism with the political liberties under welfare-state capitalism.⁴⁴ Under laissez-faire capitalism there is a legal right to think, speak, publish, assemble, and associate politically. For many citizens, however, this right cannot even be meaningfully exercised. The system permits extreme deprivations, such that finding food or shelter may dominate the lives of many who live under the regime. In such circumstances it is an understatement to characterize possession of political liberties as hollow. Indeed under such circumstances the political liberties themselves become a major vehicle of social inequality, since those who can meaningfully exercise them wield far greater political influence than those who cannot.

In welfare-state capitalism all citizens can, in at least some important sense, meaningfully exercise the political liberties. No one is forced by lack of luck or talent to live in a condition of utter deprivation, so some opportunities are present for the voices of all citizens to be heard. All citizens are, we might say, recognized as fully empowered to participate in political

⁴⁴ Rawls discusses liberties at length in Chapter IV of Rawls 1971, and he later revises his account in light of criticism due to H. L. A. Hart 1973. Rawls compares the role of liberties in these two capitalist systems in Sections 45-46 of Rawls 2001.

discourse.⁴⁵ There is accordingly substance, and not only merely form, to political liberties in a welfare-state capitalist regime.

But this is still a far cry from realizing the fair value of the political liberties. This occurs not when all citizens are in this minimal sense meaningfully able to exercise substantial liberties, but rather when all citizens can impact and influence political decisions on an equal footing.⁴⁶ The great disparities of wealth and income permitted by welfare-state capitalism prevent this sort of equality.⁴⁷ All citizens are recognized in political discourse, but they are not all respected as co-determiners of the policies and actions to be implemented or undertaken.⁴⁸

Synthesized leftism agrees with Rawls in insisting on achieving the fair value of political liberties for all citizens, also in his view that capitalism is incompatible with realizing this goal. In this way synthesized leftism incorporates both the liberal's sensitivity to the erosion of individual liberty through the consolidation of political power (whether by the government or large private

⁴⁵ This is arguably not true in the present United States, another mark of the fact that in the United States construction of the welfare state was never completed.

⁴⁶ Rawls discusses the fair value of political liberties in Sections 45-46 of Rawls 2001; this discussion was prompted in part by Norman Daniels 1975. See also Daniels 2003.

⁴⁷ For a different way of situating the fair value of political liberties with respect to the comparison between property-owning democracy and welfare-state capitalism, see O'Neill (2012), especially 81-84.

⁴⁸ Thus I endorse the contention advanced by Stuart White (2012) that Rawls is appropriately understood as a republican theorist; see also, in this connection, Thomas (2012). White's contention dovetails with a view defended in Hussain (2012), namely that we should expect greater political involvement by workers with a greater say over their working conditions.

interests) and the socialist's sensitivity to the authoritarian control characteristic of concentrated economic power.⁴⁹

2B: Antimeritocracy

The second – and perhaps more surprising – critical commitment of the leftism advocated here is to be *antimeritocratic*. There are multiple reasons this commitment may surprise. One is that a genuine meritocracy would be far more just than present social arrangements. In the case of the United States, the lack of a meaningful estate tax is enough to condemn the society as failing to enable fairness in the background of its social transactions. Even more damaging is differential quality of available education and health care, with class, race, and location unfairly determining both quality and access. The fact that meritocracy would be a great improvement over the status quo does not, however, establish that meritocracy is compatible with justice. Full realization of the welfare state, including especially high-quality health care and education for all, would be a great improvement; but it would not suffice for justice as a leftist in contemporary circumstances should understand it.

A second and related reason is that many who regard themselves as on the political left also regard themselves as advocates for meritocracy. Again the fact that the welfare state is not fully realized helps explain how this is possible. Our outrageous inequalities appropriately focus the attention of the left on the unfair and antimeritocratic advantages of the wealthy,

⁴⁹ Socialists are also more sensitive, and appropriately so, to the tendency of capitalist economic systems to devolve into fascist regimes. It is unfortunate that Rawls does not include a right-totalitarian system among the socioeconomic paradigms he discusses in Sections 41-42 of Rawls (2001).

which entail justice could be enhanced by moving toward meritocracy.⁵⁰ That a genuine meritocracy would be more just than the status quo again does not entail a meritocratic system is compatible with the ideals of justice most appropriate to our circumstances.

Rawls clearly opposes meritocracy. Regardless of whether merit is understood in terms of ethical virtue or economic productivity, it is in Rawls's view insufficiently publicly assessable to form the basis for shared cooperative activity.⁵¹ Public assessability is crucial to Rawls because it enables broad cognizance of when institutions and citizens live up to the demands of justice as they understand them, which in turn mutually assures citizens of good faith and thereby stabilizes the system of cooperation.⁵²

Though not emphasized in the same way by Rawls, a related concern is that meritocratic understandings of justice are highly vulnerable to being coopted by the already powerful. People are reluctant to believe that the social positions of others are mostly due to luck. Those who are relatively successful are reluctant to believe their relative success is mostly due to luck, moreover, even the luck of one's circumstances of birth. Thus those who occupy positions of greater power due to luck (or worse) are

⁵⁰ Rawls in particular is often mistaken for a meritocrat by non-experts, in part because his style is that of a professional academic rather than that of an agitating activist. These misunderstandings also stem from the fact that many actual liberals endorse meritocracies incompatible with Rawls's conception of justice.

⁵¹ In Rawls's taxonomy meritocracy is a type of perfectionism, which he considers and rejects in Section 50 of Rawls (1971). Meritocracy also runs directly afoul of the Rawlsian conviction that inequalities must redound to the benefit of the least advantaged.

⁵² Rawls discusses the problem of assurance in Section 42 of Rawls (1971).

commonly able to encourage widespread belief that talent, effort, or virtue played a much larger role than in fact it did in determining their position in society.⁵³

These are telling objections to meritocracy, arguably decisive against the view. But more profound is the fact that meritocratic political understandings are incompatible with fundamental social equality, since they apportion social power in accord with features not shared equally by citizens. Broadly speaking, social power correlates strongly with economic power. This does not mean social equality entails economic equality, but it does entail economic inequalities must be carefully regulated and must be given special justification. Rawls asserts his difference principle to regulate permissible inequalities, and the justification for this principle is that the inequalities it permits redound to the advantage of the least advantaged, thereby expressing deep reciprocity and minimizing the “strains of commitment” of belonging to the least advantaged group.⁵⁴ Nothing to do with talent or virtue figures in this justification, so Rawls can comfortably claim natural talents are a “common asset”.⁵⁵ This expresses the idea that talents are to be marshalled for the common good, rather than the idea that those with talents are to be rewarded for having and using them by being accorded greater social power.

⁵³ Meritocracy is thus appropriately associated with elitism, which is a major political drawback of the idea in a democracy.

⁵⁴ In Section 39 of Rawls (2001), Rawls argues the difference principle is to be preferred to the principle of restricted utility on the ground that it involves fewer “strains of commitment”. Alexander Kaufman (2018) rightly emphasizes the importance of this ground in Rawls’s case for the difference principle.

⁵⁵ Rawls refers to natural talents as a common asset in Section 17 and Section 29 of Rawls (1971). Indeed he says this idea encapsulates the spirit of both the difference principle and justice as fairness as a whole.

I have focused this section on Rawls's anti-capitalism, spending relatively little space discussing socialism. This is mainly because Marx's anti-meritocracy is obvious. It is most baldly witnessed by his adoption of the famous socialist dictum "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" as the fundamental distributive principle of a communist society.⁵⁶

It should be noted that earlier in the same work Marx observes that the principle "to each according to his contribution", which was also popular within the socialist tradition of his day, is appropriate to a society in transition from capitalism to communism.⁵⁷ This principle can be read in a meritocratic way, and G. A. Cohen's Marxian luck-egalitarianism is similar in this respect.⁵⁸ Still, since both Marx and Marxians like Cohen overwhelmingly emphasize social egalitarianism, there is strong pressure to understand their commitment to principles that are open to meritocratic interpretations as subordinated to a more fundamental antimeritocratic position.⁵⁹ And regardless of how Marx or Cohen thinks socialism is best understood, meritocratic socialist views – no less than meritocratic liberal views – should be rejected for the reasons articulated previously within this subsection.

⁵⁶ See Part I of Marx (1891). Regardless of whether socialism is correct, I (like Rawls) do not endorse this as a principle of distributive justice.

⁵⁷ See Part I of Marx (1891). Here again I would join Rawls in rejecting this as a principle of distributive justice for societies at any stage of development.

⁵⁸ See Cohen (1989) for the germ of his luck-egalitarianism.

⁵⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for encouraging acknowledgment of the movements of socialist thought that can be heard in a meritocratic key.

2C: Antiwelfarism

The third – perhaps most surprising – critical commitment is to be *antiwelfarist*. As has already been observed, this commitment consists in part in rejection of the welfare state as the model for an ideal socioeconomic system. Welfare state provisions such as guaranteed retirement income, unemployment insurance, health care, and education are of course great improvements over laissez-faire policies and are to be defended against those who would reduce or eliminate them in the name of fiscal responsibility. But left politics must articulate a conception of society differing not only in extent but also in kind from the welfare state. And in so doing, it must also articulate a conception of broad socioeconomic activity differing in kind from capitalism.

One major problem with the welfare state is specifying the level of welfare provision in a way satisfying to the public. This is in part a problem of disagreement, since what constitutes the “suitable social minimum” of welfare is sensitive to context and may vary among reasonable citizens. It is also in part a problem of publicity, since even if we stipulate unanimity about the level of welfare to be provided, welfare is notoriously inscrutable. It will be difficult to discern, even at the level of broad socioeconomic groups, when that level has been reached and so other political values may be invoked to shape the production and distribution of resources.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ See Section 38 of Rawls (2001). It is characteristic of Rawls to emphasize publicity considerations of this sort at every turn. He deploys such considerations to oppose utilitarian invocations of welfare, happiness, or desire-satisfaction as a currency of justice. He also uses them to oppose Amartya Sen’s proposed currency of justice: if capabilities are functions from resources to welfare, happiness, or desire-satisfaction, then they are also

But as occurred in the last section with meritocracy, there is a problem with welfarism more profound and fundamental than its inscrutability. In this case the objection is that welfare state institutions fail to constitute the citizenry as reciprocal producers of social goods. Instead they are characteristically experienced as redistributing, in a pejorative sense, fruits of productive activity. These institutions thereby encourage a reactionary conception of economic activity as comprising “makers” and “takers”.⁶¹

Any proposal to replace existing welfare state programs with universal basic income reinforces these reactionary social understandings, and is for that reason alone to be resisted. The fact that universal basic income is not means-tested, and so is not narrowly tailored to address problems of need, does not preclude a social understanding according to which that is its primary purpose and justification. (Compare the fact that the mortgage interest tax deduction in the United States benefits the wealthy, for example, yet is understood to be justified by its promotion of home ownership by the middle class.) I expect this sort of putative justification for universal basic income to become far more prevalent, as this policy proposal is increasingly conjoined with the worry that mechanization and automatization of the

problematically inscrutable. See Sen (1987, 1992), and see Section 51 of Rawls (2001).

⁶¹ There is a strong tendency in capitalist economic systems to lionize leading capitalists; consider the near-cult status of billionaires Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, and Elon Musk. This fuses a meritocratic rationale for capitalist institutions with these institutions’ understanding of productive activity as primarily individualistic rather than reciprocal. Thus these figures are not only to be rewarded for their supposedly greater talent, virtue, or productivity with a greater share of social power; those who are not rewarded are meant to admire them and to be grateful to them for their use of their talent, virtue, or productivity. These complexes of ideas are to be rejected utterly.

economy will fail to generate enough jobs.⁶² Wherever possible, the means-testing of aid programs is to be avoided for similar reasons.

Proposals to augment existing programs with a universal basic income are more difficult to assess, as these could form part of the basis of a new socioeconomic system. But even these proposals are fraught, since they discourage conceiving of economic production as reciprocally cooperative.⁶³ Accordingly I think universal basic income should be supported only as part of a broader package of progressive policies, notably including large increases for the wealthy in capital gains, income, and estate taxes.⁶⁴

Left opposition to welfarism should extend beyond this, furthermore, in denying the adequacy of the welfare state as a model for socioeconomic cooperation. It should reject welfare itself as the metric by which social institutions are most fundamentally assessed, and not only because of its inscrutability. As Rawls emphasizes, social provision of welfare without deeper reciprocity engenders political alienation and apathy.⁶⁵ As Marxians emphasize, social provision of welfare without meaningful ways to exercise economic agency engenders social

⁶² Thus this concern would also apply to what Schemmel terms a “universal welfare state”; see Schemmel (2015b). This is of course different from a rationale for universal basic income that emphasizes its potential to enable all citizens to participate fully in democratic politics.

⁶³ Rawls was mindful of the potential such proposals have to undermine reciprocity in social cooperation, hence his (somewhat notorious) remark: “Surfers must somehow support themselves.” See Section 53 of Rawls (2001).

⁶⁴ For a more promising set of policy proposals, see Thad Williamson (2012a, 2012b).

⁶⁵ Rawls articulates this sentiment in Section 39 of Rawls (2001).

alienation.⁶⁶ These characteristic byproducts of reactionary economic conceptions are not only dispiriting, they corrode social bonds and thereby threaten stability. They are also vulnerable to exploitation by demagogues and xenophobes who would correlate the supposed classes of makers and takers with membership in religions, ethnic groups, and political parties.

One way to capture what these all concerns have in common is to say that welfare-state capitalist societies fail to live up to their understandings of citizens as sharing in human dignity. Like utilitarianism understood as a moral doctrine, a politics that aims most fundamentally at welfare or desire-satisfaction cannot capture what is most important in our social lives as human beings. Welfare is at best an appropriate focus of human social relations with lower animals.

This is inadequate even as account of our relations with higher animals.⁶⁷ These animals have capacities for comprehension and for reasons-response. Accordingly we can relate to them with mutual recognition, acknowledging not only that their welfare is a matter of genuine worth rather than indifference, but also that their appreciation of their own treatment matters in its own right. This enables not just mutual intelligibility but also mutual accountability. In a welfare state we at least achieve this level of mutual esteem in social relations with others, provided that the welfare state includes equal (if not fair) political liberty.

More than this is required for fully adequate social relations with other human persons. Not only must we not be indifferent

⁶⁶ Marx's fullest account of alienation (*Entfremdung*) is found in Marx (1932).

⁶⁷ Accordingly laissez-faire is not an adequate account of human social relations with conscious animals in general, even if it is appropriate to leave most wild animals alone.

to one another, and not only must we not be unintelligible or unaccountable to them, we must also relate to them on terms of mutual consent, as reasonable social equals.⁶⁸ This equality must include, as socialists often emphasize and as Rawls does too with the notion of the fair value of political liberties, roughly equal social power when deciding matters of societal importance.

Yet even roughly equal social power does not fully capture what is needed for a fully adequate political and socioeconomic system. This rough equality of social power must flow from a social understanding of each of us as respectable beings and must be grounded in a political culture that dynamically recreates that social understanding across new circumstances and across generations.⁶⁹ Only a society like that reliably and stably elicits engagement and affiliation that secures just social cooperation indefinitely. If the reflections of this essay are on the right track, capitalism is incompatible with such a society. I do not think any of us knows with certainty whether socialism is the best framework for understanding what such a society looks like. But regardless of the answer to that question, we must fill out Rawls's sketch of property-owning democracy (perhaps eschewing the label), since if we are to progress transformatively then that socioeconomic system will likely be at least an important stage in the progression.

⁶⁸ Though these distinctions are not identical, there is a parallel between the distinction I draw here between responsibility and reasonableness and that drawn in Rawls (1999). There is furthermore a parallel between both of these distinctions and the distinction between the second and third levels of Lawrence Kohlberg's scheme of moral cognitive development. See Chapter VIII of Rawls (1971), Kohlberg (1973), and see also David Reidy (2017). I hope to investigate these parallels in future work.

⁶⁹ Rawls discusses self-respect in Section 67 of Rawls (1971).

As left-liberals sometimes remind us, economic goods are not the be-all and end-all of justice. Political liberties are at least as important, provided we bear in mind not just that merely formal liberties can be useless but also that there are multiple gradations of meaningful exercise of political liberties. Not only are we not mere tools for promoting welfare, as both capitalism and utilitarianism too often suggest, but our welfare is not the most important thing about how we relate to others politically.⁷⁰ Nor even is mutual responsibility, as crucial as it is for us to be both intelligible and accountable in our social relations with others. Mutual consent and equality are the only social relations worthy of our social and political nature.

As socialists sometimes remind us, these social understandings are only successful, and are only sustainable, when backed by matching power relations. All the indispensable notions for characterizing successful human social relations – including justice, fairness, consent, equality, freedom, accountability, and welfare – can be coopted and can be replaced with simulacra. Unlike Marx in his more critical moments, I think it would be an error to jettison or radically reunderstand these crucial notions.⁷¹ But as we preserve and develop these notions to help guide and animate our political life, we must guard against their being used, knowingly or otherwise, for reactionary purposes. Furthermore – as Marx and Rawls were careful to note – even good versions of these ideas are not sufficient. We need a leftism where these ideas

⁷⁰ For further discussion see Freeman (2011) and Brudney (2013). I think these considerations are serious enough to entail not only that the principle of restricted utility is inferior to justice as fairness, but also that it cannot join with justice as fairness as part of a shared family of reasonable conceptions of the good. For the idea of such a family of conceptions of justice, see Rawls (1997).

⁷¹ See Marx (1844, 1891). For discussion see Allen Wood (1981), Section 52 of Rawls (2001), and Rawls (2007), 335-353.

and the social power relations that ensure their positive deployment are mutually reinforcing. To succeed, this leftism must draw on both the left-liberal and socialist traditions. My hope is that this dynamic synthesis engenders and deepens respect and solidarity across what is arguably the most prominent fissure in left politics.

Conclusion

The leftism emerging from these reflections is broad and substantive, encapsulating major themes of both the left-liberal and the socialist traditions. It criticizes the institutions of contemporary welfare-state capitalism while making progress toward articulating a superior socioeconomic model. It is noncommittal, however, on the important question of whether private ownership of most wealth is compatible with this new model. Accordingly it leaves open whether the ultimate goal is property-owning democracy, liberal democratic socialism, or even a form of anti-authoritarian communism (if such is possible).⁷²

As has been emphasized above, however, the failure of leftism to articulate a consensus ambition at that level need not constitute an obstacle to leftists unifying around it. All leftists should oppose both Soviet-style command economies and the violent overthrow of the current political regimes, since each would engender a worse authoritarianism than presently obtains. What is needed now is a common vision to channel righteous outrage about today's injustices into a feedback loop of democratic advance rather than into a feedback loop of

⁷² For further discussion of varieties of socialist reform and their historical roots, see Axel Honneth (2017).

authoritarian retreat. This vision is no mere *modus vivendi*; it is a major step along a common path.

Accordingly I think advocates both for and against socialism should adopt a more relaxed attitude toward their dispute. Both sides are fallible. Neither side needs to know who is correct to make common cause for both immediate and medium-term goals.⁷³ An opportunity is presented by the passage of political power to generations more removed from the cold war and more open to ideas drawn from the socialist tradition. With the global climate worsening and transnational right-authoritarianism rising, the opportunity is one we cannot afford to miss.⁷⁴

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⁷³ Thomas Piketty (2013) makes important observations about the atypical character of the postwar period that enabled it to combine economic growth with reduced inequality. This could be interpreted as evidence against the stability of property-owning democracy, since it suggests private ownership of society's means of investment is not normally compatible with leftward progress. This could also be interpreted, however, as evidence that the historical record is idiosyncratic and so a limited guide to what is possible both inside and outside of socialist economic structures.

⁷⁴ At the time of this writing, moreover, the COVID-19 global pandemic is raging.

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