

Title	The Economics of Feasible Socialism Revisited
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Brief Introduction	<p>Preface</p> <p>The word 'socialism' is apt to produce strong feelings, of enthusiasm, cynicism, hostility. It is the road to a future just society, or to serfdom. It is the next stage of an ineluctable historical process, or a tragic aberration, a cul-de-sac, into which the deluded masses are drawn by power-hungry agitator-intellectuals. My own attitude will emerge in the pages that follow. Let me make it clear that my object is not propagandist, in either direction. It is to explore <i>what could be</i> a workable, feasible sort of socialism, which might be achieved within the lifetime of a child already conceived. I have spent the last quarter-century studying and trying to understand the 'socialist' countries of Eastern Europe. Brought up in a social-democratic environment, son of a Menshevik who was arrested by the Bolsheviks, I inherited a somewhat critical view of Soviet reality: if this really was socialism, I would prefer to be elsewhere. (Luckily, I was elsewhere!) Of course the Soviet system did not take the shape it did because of 'betrayal', or the accident of Stalin's personality. I have tried to describe the way in which the system developed, paying particular attention to the economic aspect. I have listened to critics who have contrasted the Soviet variety of socialism with the vision of Marx. That there are differences is obvious, but plainly it is not enough to note them, and then to criticise the reality of the USSR because it does not conform to the vision of Marx, or indeed of Lenin. What if the vision is unrealisable, contradictory? Does it make sense to 'blame' Stalin and his successors for not having achieved what cannot be achieved in the real world? Can the excesses and crimes which they <i>did</i> commit in the real world have been due in some part to the doctrines they espoused? (If a loyal Marxist protests that these doctrines were humanist, that they did not envisage a despotic society or mass repression, one can remind him or her of what happened in other countries with a Christian doctrine—and that fellow-Christians were the most numerous victims!) As an economist, I have been struck by the fact that the functional logic of centralised planning 'fits' far too easily into the practice of centralised despotism.</p> <p>Very well, but what is the alternative? Marx contrasted socialism utopian with socialism scientific. For reasons which will be expounded in the first part of this book, I believe that Marx's socialism was utopian. Can there be a 'socialism scientific'? Not 'scientific' in the sense that it can be proved 'scientifically' that this is the way history marches, nor yet in the form of a blueprint of a perfect society which we would call 'socialist'. Nothing perfect, nothing optimal. Something that can reasonably be expected to function with a reasonable probability of avoiding both despotism and intolerable inefficiency.</p> <p>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). I feel not too well-disposed either towards the Chicago school, whose belief in 'free enterprise' seems quite unaffected by the growth of giant bureaucratic corporations, and whose remedies for current ills seem to benefit the rich and ignore unemployment. And even Milton Friedman is preferable to the abstract model-builders whose works fill the pages of our professional journals, since he at least advocates action in the real world (even though I believe the action he advocates is wrong).</p> <p>Unexpectedly, I find myself quoting an American theologian:</p> <p>At least we've got to examine socialism and not let it be a 'scare-word' of the generation; at least we've got to challenge capitalism and not let it be the sacrosanct word of the generation; at least we've got to investigate some new mixes of the two that don't escalate into Stalinism, but also don't escalate into the mind-blowing profits that are clutched by the few at the cost of hope, and even life, to the many. _</p> <p>Yes, I know, it is not by any means obvious that the poor are poor <i>because</i> successful businessmen make a great deal of money. None the less, I do find the present distribution of wealth offensive, especially as it seems to bear so little relationship to any real contribution to welfare in any recognisable sense.</p> <p>So I have put to myself some questions. What species of socialism <i>could</i> be envisaged? Would such a socialism be free of the defects of the Soviet model and of other 'really existing' variants? Could it operate with reasonable efficiency, and give satisfaction to the citizens in their capacities as consumers and producers? Since economic and social problems cannot be assumed out of existence, a realistically conceived socialist society will have to cope with them, there will be contradictions there will be strains, disputes. If human beings are free to choose, they are also free to choose wrongly, and there would be conflicts with choices made by others.</p> <p>The plan of this book is as follows. After a brief examination of why it is that socialist ideas and aims must be taken seriously, I launch into a critical review of Marx's ideas on socialism which, to my mind, are very seriously defective and misleading. This is followed by an examination of the experience of the USSR and some other countries which have sought to introduce 'socialism', to see what lessons can be drawn. I also discuss there the lessons which some existing critics have already drawn, and the alternatives they propose. This is followed by a discussion of the problems of transition: how can one move towards an acceptable form of socialism?</p> <p>*Robert McAfee Brown, Theological implications of the arms race' (undated, presumably 1961).</p>