
SPECIAL ISSUE

**(En)Visioning Socialism IV: Raising the Future in
Our Imaginations Before Raising It in Reality**

INTRODUCTION

We pre-suppose labor in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality.

— Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, ch. 7, sec. 1

Marx's often-cited insight into the uniqueness of human species-being, in the epigram just above, has not, so far as we know, been applied to the socialism-envisioning project with which this special issue, and its three predecessors, have been concerned. But the connection seems organic — even prophetic. Something that begins with the smallest act of conscious creation — labor — must necessarily emerge into the shared democratic and scientific practice of managing and shaping our social world in the service of human existence and development.

The three predecessor issues appeared in S&S, Spring, 1992 (Vol. 56, No. 1); Spring, 2002 (Vol. 66, No. 1); and April, 2012 (Vol. 76, No. 2). So this issue, the “IV” in the title, *had* to appear in April, 2022 (Vol. 86, No. 2), fulfilling the ten-year cycle! Its first section, “Reflections from Former Participants,” gives some indication of the evolving unity of the project, as well as of the variety and controversies (there will always be controversies). Its second section, “Models and Structures,” focuses on the operational aspects of systemic socialism (see below). (If we may: the core of the “system” being envisioned may perhaps best be captured by the concept of *democratic planning*.) The final section, “Perspectives,” returns to the broader range of human concerns at the heart of socialist thinking and movements, and reminds us that the

systemic focus cannot and should not be pursued out of context, in isolation from the technological, ecological and gender-related components of the human situation that all progressive and revolutionary thinkers and actors must address.

The capitalism-dominated environment into which this project is launched has given new urgency to the search for alternatives, and people everywhere are expressing the need for that search, not least in the United States where increasing expressions of interest in socialism have been noted. That interest has mostly taken shape as general but non-specific desires: for greater equality, solidarity, stability, security, meaningful participation, and creation of the best conditions for enriching life and realizing our potential. Alongside this thrust for democracy we can place the age-old but imprecise dreams of the dreamers (including Marxist ones!), as expressed in formulations such as “the community of the associated producers,” or the “free development of each as the condition for the free development of all.” We can also include the glorious specifications of details, in the imaginative projections of writers whom Marx and Engels called “utopians,” or writers of “recipes for the cookshops of the future.”

All of this is useful, the heritage from which we build. But we now hold out for an organizing conception of socialism that transcends these sources, and projects a qualitative vision of a distinctive set of social and economic

SCIENCE & SOCIETY

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S&S does not adhere to any particular school of contemporary Marxist discussion, and does not attempt to define precise boundaries for Marxism. It does encourage respectful attention to the entire Marxist tradition, as well as to cutting-edge tools and concepts from the present-day social science literatures.

Editorial correspondence: see “Instructions to Contributors,” inside back cover.

relations. We give this vision various names (see the contributions to this issue), but perhaps its various aspects can be grasped by the term *systemic socialism*. The *system* envisaged here is thus more general than anyone's detailed institutional proposals; the details will emerge from the enormous variety of actual historical experiences, rather than being neatly predictable by any "universal reformer" (however clever that person may be). But the socialist system that we are "raising in our imagination" also transcends the vague sensibilities of democratic and humanist striving; it must be *operational*, at least in terms of its core features. Here is how we put it in the Call for Papers for this issue, published in S&S, January 2020:

We must answer the question, when it is put to us by skeptics: *concretely*, what would you socialists do differently? If you actually *replace* the capitalist class . . . what would you put in its place? (Just saying "the working class in power" doesn't cut it!) *How* might production, management, incentives and income be organized? *How* would decision-making be done, and decisions made, in both the short term and for the future? *How* could actual systems and structures be developed that address the conflicts and constraints, the ecological challenge, the population challenge, the need to transcend racist, misogynist and nationalist divisions? And *how* might any of this turn out to be decidedly different from what capitalism achieves currently, given the greatest popular pressure we can bring to bear to counteract its worst impacts?

So we reject the rigid binary: *either* engage in detailed but suspect blueprinting; *or* join the pre-systemic socialists (and liberal reformers) in muddling through with eclectic and partial "fixes."

Will there be a *fifth* special issue? This is out of the hands of the editors of and contributors to the current one, for reasons of mortality alone! But given our working-class collective will to survive the intensifying crises and indignities of the present, and given the enormous importance of the socialist tradition in critical and progressive thought, the questions will continue to be needed, and the ever-evolving answers likewise. If our efforts at the present moment can be consulted and perhaps play a role in future efforts to go beyond them, it will all have been well worth it.

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