

THE TERRAIN OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Sam Gindin



This essay is a revised version of the talk originally delivered on April 17, 2001 as the inaugural lecture for the Packer Endowment in Social Justice. The Packer Endowment in Social Justice provides for a program of teaching, outreach, and research within the fields of social justice. It includes scholarships to graduate and undergraduate students committed to promoting social justice and a unique experiment, involving the Packer Chair, that brings students and non-student activists together in a seminar setting to exchange ideas and experiences.

Sam Gindin is the first winner of the Daniel Singer Millennium Prize for this essay "Anti-Capitalism and the Terrain of Social Justice" as the best essay in the spirit of the late journalist author and lecturer. Details on this award can be found on The Nation magazine website at www.thenation.com. This essay will also be published by Monthly Review magazine in the U.S.A.

The Social Justice series is published by The CSJ Foundation for Research and Education. John Anderson is the series editor. This is the seventh pamphlet in the Social Justice Series.

Funding the Common Sense Revolutionaries

by Robert MacDermid

Canada's Democratic Deficit: Is Proportional Representation the Answer?

by Dennis Pilon

And We Still Ain't Satisfied: Gender Inequality In Canada

by Karen Hadley

Making it your Economy: Unions and Economic Justice

by Charlotte A. B. Yates

From Poverty Wages to a Living Wage: A status Report for 2001

by Christopher Schenk

Poverty, Income Inequality, and Health in Canada

by Dennis Raphael

The Terrain of Social Justice

by Sam Gindin

THE TERRAIN OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

Sam Gindin

**Packer Chair in Social Justice,
Department of Political Science,
York University**

CSJ Foundation for Research and Education

Published by the CSJ Foundation for Research and Education
489 College Street, Suite 303B
Toronto, Ontario
Canada, M6G 1A5
Email: justice@socialjustice.org
Web site: www.socialjustice.org

Copyright © 2002 Sam Gindin and CSJ Foundation for Research and Education

The Packer Social Justice Lecture
ISBN 0-9688539-5-1

Layout and cover design by Tony Biddle
www.perfectworldproductions.com

Introduction: If Small Changes Are Impossible, Then.....

Until recently, a pervasive sense of there-is-no-alternative left us with a debilitating pessimism. Seattle was, arguably, the long-awaited antidote. Where social democracy had seen the power of capital and was cowed by it, the Seattle protestors recognized that building a decent world meant actively *resisting* it. In this defiant understanding that resistance creates the space for hope, the chain of protests initiated by Seattle fell in with a tradition that saw realism in historic terms, rather than in a fetishism of the present.

That tradition of an open future is, ironically, very much rooted in the social revolutions that gave birth to the same capitalism that the establishment was now deifying. Witnessing the transformation of what had, for centuries, been considered the only way things might be, the French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville observed how quickly “[T]he evil suffered patiently as inevitable [becomes] unendurable as soon as one conceives the idea of escaping from it.”¹ Shortly after, John Stuart Mill echoed the same sentiment:

The entire history of social improvement has been a series of transitions, by which one custom or institution after another, from being a supposed primary necessity of social existence, has passed into the rank of a universally stigmatized injustice and tyranny.²

The Seattle and post-Seattle protests had no ready-made alternatives. They did not signal, as some prematurely assumed at the time, the labour movement’s readiness to join, if not lead, a new internationalism. Nor was the mobilizing capacity and sense of injustice they demonstrated directly transferable to other crucial *domestic* issues. There has, for example, been little evidence that the social movements that led to Seattle are as yet either inclined to embrace, or capable of realizing, the larger task of organizing sustained mass demonstrations within the United States against American poverty, racial oppression, and the most aggressively anti-

“ The Seattle and post-Seattle protests...did not signal, as some prematurely assumed at the time, the labour movement’s readiness to join, if not lead, a new internationalism. ”

union administrative practices in the developed world.

“ If social justice could no longer be discussed without addressing globalization, Seattle declared that globalization could no longer be addressed without addressing capitalism. ”

The importance of these protest-spectacles lay, rather, in their combining the energy of direct action with the visionary potential of abstract thought. If small changes were — as business, politicians, and editorial writers kept reminding us — impossible, then maybe it was time again to start thinking big. If social justice could no longer be discussed without addressing globalization, Seattle declared that globalization could no longer be addressed without addressing capitalism. And so, in the course of their resistance, a new generation of protestors dared to name the system that hath no name.

By naming the previously unspoken social system behind globalization, globalization was being politicized. Where “globalization” had become a weapon brandished by business, politicians, and the media to explain what we couldn’t do, placing capitalism itself up for discussion and criticism was part of insisting that the limits we faced were socially constructed, and could therefore be challenged, stretched, and one day overcome. The protestors raised the stakes because enough of them didn’t want in, but demanded something different. The term “anti-capitalism” arrived on the public agenda.

While an identification with anti-capitalism does in itself not constitute an alternative, it does point towards a new political project oriented to discovering, articulating, and building an alternative. To demand, in echoes of the sixties, the currently impossible but to actually be realistic about this rather than *only* utopian, means figuring out what “anti-capitalism” means and where it leads. This entails speaking to the limited nature of social justice inherent in liberal capitalism, to the failed social democratic experiment at humanizing capitalism, to the contradictions and opportunities pregnant in the present historical moment, and to elaborating an alternative vision of social justice. *This* is what we need to collectively contemplate as part of the exhilarating but intimidating prospect of launching a new politics that can move beyond protest, and towards closing the gap between what is and what might be.

Liberalism: Social Justice as Economic Freedom

Friedrich Hayek, Nobel laureate in Economics and a principal twentieth century defender of liberal capitalism, once stated that “...nothing has done so much to destroy the juridical safeguards of individual freedom as the striving after this mirage of social justice.”³ We do not have to spend a great deal of time on his jaundiced reading of the history of struggles for social justice. What *is* however worth noting is his unequivocal presumption that social justice and the freedoms we have under modern capitalism are not only distinct from each other, but mutually *antagonistic*.

What so many others have obscured and what Hayek to his credit confronts directly, is that inequality is not an unfortunate aberration under capitalism, but an inescapable outcome and an essential condition of its successful economic functioning. Capitalism is — and this is surely as clear today as it ever was — a social system based on class and competition. Such a society guarantees not just inequality of *result*, but insofar as the results of inequality are passed on through the institution of the family and the spatial divisions of uneven capitalist development, the inequality is reproduced inter-generationally and inter-regionally. This leads to a decisive inequality of *opportunity*.

“ Inequality is not an unfortunate aberration under capitalism, but an inescapable outcome and an essential condition of its successful economic functioning. ”

It is not surprising therefore that the most clear-minded defenders of capitalism consequently seek to displace the terrain of debate over the legitimacy of capitalism from distributive or equal-opportunity notions of social justice, to notions of individual freedom and especially *market* freedoms. The individual is placed at the centre of a world in which the concept of the community or the collective is confined to the state — liberalism’s old nemesis. Liberalism then seeks to limit the power of the state not only by the rule of law, freedom of expression and association, and elected legislatures, but also and especially by the rights of property, the inviolability of contract in market exchanges, and the protection of private family spaces to enjoy the fruits of property and labour.

There is no denying the powerful practical appeal of this structure. Both civil and political rights and the historically unprecedented economic dynamism and possibility of rising standards of living rested on it. Yet the reality of class inequality behind this structure could not so easily be set aside. It is only through class-tinged lenses that someone can describe as fully democratic a society in which some people control the potential of others, control how that potential develops over time, privately appropriate the surplus created in social production, and apply that surplus to restructure work, communities, and future opportunities.

The contradictions of liberal justice rest on the fact that a market *economy* creates a market *society*, and that private property is not and never was a relationship between people and things, but a relationship between *people*. Historically, the creation of markets and private property were not, as liberal mythology tends to present it, a matter of getting the state to stand aside so natural human propensities could unfold. Private property in particular emerged with the support of an absolutist state controlled by landed interests who asserted unconditional rights over property which had previously been constrained by traditional obligations. Those interests, backed by the state, forcibly expropriated the commons — lands formerly accessible to the community — for their exclusively private use. The need to reproduce these kinds of private property rights and the privileges they imply necessitated a *permanently* strong, active, and class-biased state. Today, the drive to deepen and expand such rights takes the form of neoliberal globalization.

“Capitalism’s inequalities, it is crucial to emphasize, are not simply about some getting more and others less, but rather that the economic freedom capitalism embodies involves guaranteeing different kinds of freedoms for different people.”

Capitalism’s inequalities, it is crucial to emphasize, are not simply about some getting more and others less, but rather that the economic freedom capitalism embodies involves guaranteeing *different* kinds of freedoms for *different* people. For a minority, economic freedom revolves around the power to organize production and accumulate; for the rest, freedom to sell one’s productive potential in a labour market and, on the basis of that, to exercise some personal choice in consumer markets. What the minority is accumulating as part of its freedom includes power *over*

the labour of others and therefore over their “individuality”. The freedom/power to sell one’s productive potential and to exercise some choice in consumer markets, in contrast, is founded on a dependency on those who provide the jobs and the commodities available for consumption.

A recent magazine ad for Diesel jeans graphically demonstrates this distinction at the heart of capitalist freedoms. Featured is a sleepy-eyed model on a leather couch languidly holding a cool cocktail drink. “Think” she coos to us, “of everything that’s wrong in the world. Then think of shopping. That’s why,” she confides, “I like shopping.”

Yet while the message in the ad invites us to escape the troubling world, the ambition of the corporation *behind* the ad is to actively engage and restructure that world in terms of opening up new markets, allocating the investment that shapes communities, and fashioning not just what we drink and sit on and wear, but also the attitudes and values through which we are supposed to define ourselves. What the ad, to no great surprise, does not stimulate us to explore is either the corporation’s power or any sense that we might be more than individual shoppers who seek to find escape from the common grievances, alienation, and dashed hopes we share with others as we go about addressing our daily lives, *including* how to get the money for the things we need or think we need in such a world.

“Think” she coos to us, “of everything that’s wrong in the world. Then think of shopping. That’s why,” she confides, “I like shopping.”

The Failure of Reform and the Counter-Attack

Capitalism’s moral limits and political vulnerability were visible from the beginning and raised the issue of ameliorative responses. Montesquieu, the French aristocrat writing in the mid 1700s, drew on earlier notions of social responsibility and combined them with a sober awareness of the realities of nascent capitalism to express a remarkably early argument for the welfare state:

The state owes to every citizen an assured subsistence, proper nourishment, suitable clothing, and a mode of life not incompatible with health...whether it is to prevent the people from suffering, or whether it be to prevent them from revolting.⁴

It nevertheless took the industrial and political organizing of the working classes, two world wars, a great depression, and a golden age of economic growth before the conditions could be created for modern social democracy's attempt to come to the moral rescue of capitalism through the welfare state. But the gains in this period proved to be rather transitory and, even at the time, it was fairly clear that popular aspirations for democracy and social-justice — which were generally modest — were nevertheless constricted.⁵ What was not on the agenda in the golden age, certainly not for social democrats looking to a humane capitalism, was much of an inclination to challenge the limits of a democracy that didn't look to democratize the institutions of corporate power and of state bureaucracy. There was no longer any questioning by social democracy of the social relations at the heart of the economy, of the political division of society into those

“ It nevertheless took the industrial and political organizing of the working classes, two world wars, a great depression, and a golden age of economic growth before the conditions could be created for modern social democracy's attempt to come to the moral rescue of capitalism through the welfare state. ”

that led and those that followed, of the divide embedded in a welfare state between those who planned and organized social services and those who were dependent on them.

By the early seventies, in the context of intensified competition and declining profits, the earlier concessions accepted by capitalism became problematic; those concessions to social pressures came to be understood as having undermined the requisite market discipline precisely because they diverted too many resources to uncommodified and non-profitable uses. What were recently measures of capitalism's achievements were redefined as responsible for the end of the golden age and as unaffordable barriers to capital accumulation.

The neoliberal response set out to undo the historically acquired social limits that had redefined liberalism in practice in the postwar era. Neoliberalism named a strategy that sought to place capitalism clearly back on the track of its still incomplete development by accel-

erating the drive to commodify, and therefore open every aspect of life, to profits and the social discipline imposed by profits. This was not just a matter of the extension of markets spatially (“globalization”), but of deepening the domestic penetration of markets into any social, personal, or cultural space that had previously managed to escape subordination to a capitalistic calculus. Since democracy tends to recreate protections against the anti-social logic of markets, the implementation of neoliberalism also necessitated a decline, one way or the other, in effective democracy.

The Contradictions of Neoliberal Success

For much of the left, the contradictions of neoliberalism lie in the dynamics of its economic logic and their belief in the imminence of a breakdown somewhat akin to the Great Depression. In contrast, I’d argue that the potentials for building an effective counter-movement to capitalism, while inseparable from capitalism’s material imperatives, lie not with its impending collapse, but in the nature of its on-going **success** — that is, in the nature of the neo-justice, neo-democracy, and neo-politics that came with neo-liberalism.

In reversing past popular gains in wages, benefits, and security, capitalism was undoing the integrative role those previous concessions played. In successfully consolidating its unilateral power to set the agenda, concerns were triggered about the content of capitalist democracy. In bringing more and more of life deeper into the cash nexus, the individualism capitalism offered as the prize began to look more and more tawdry. In getting so much of what it asked for, but not delivering on its promises, it raised challenges — still very tentative of course — about the authority of its agenda as representing the *nation’s* agenda. And related to this, as capitalism marched on beyond its national domain, it gained new freedoms and powers vis-a-vis domestic constraints, but may have weakened its political base nationally.

Neoliberalism seems to fit so well with the no-alternative argu-

“ As capitalism marched on beyond its national domain, it gained new freedoms and powers vis-a-vis domestic constraints but may have weakened its political base nationally. ”

ment because its very structure — the universalization of market dependence — tends to de-politicize what happens. Markets, not social relations, seem the final arbiter. “The market made us do it” becomes a national excuse. The capitalism-with-a-human-face of the Keynesian era is replaced by a capitalism with no face at all. But the project of deepening and expanding markets requires the formal consolidation of property rights. And this, in the era of globalization, has meant international treaties and international administrative bodies: NAFTA and the FTAA, the IMF and the WTO. This has led to two direct kinds of challenges to the new economic order.

The constitutionalization of property rights in these treaties and institutions, placed — with a definitive push from the movements questioning these treaties — the *meaning* of these changes onto the public agenda. As the formerly invisible social reality behind market-making was made more visible, the abstraction of the market was re-politicized. Capitalism had a face again. At the same time,

the international institutions that were to carry out these agreements could not in the light of day readily defend what they were doing. Such distant bodies simply do not have the cultural, historic, or administrative authority to defend controversial messages. In extending its reach with regards to international property rights, capitalism exposed that reach, and we got a series of Seattles.

There is another dimension to this problem for capitalism in extending its reach, and it relates to the decline of a distinctly national capitalist class.

Much attention has been paid to whether, in the context of the globalization of production and capital flows, the nation-state is still relevant. This is, it cannot be stressed too much, the wrong question. Strong states are not the enemies of markets but essential architectural partners. Only a strong state could cross the geographic, social, personal, and biological borders demanded by capitalism in its latest phase. What *has* changed is the relationship between corporations and what was formerly designated their home state.

Today each nation-state represents a constellation of *both* domestic and foreign capital and even the domestic capital is increasingly internationally oriented. And so what has in fact been

“ Much attention has been paid to whether, in the context of the globalization of production and capital flows, the nation-state is still relevant. This is, it cannot be stressed too much, the wrong question. ”

fading away is not the existence of national *states*, but — with the possible exception of the United States — the notion of a specifically *national capitalist class*. In Canada, for example, by the measure of a specific commitment to the development of Canadian communities and Canadian productive capacities, there has been little evidence — especially since the free trade fight of the mid-80's — of anything particularly “Canadian” about Canadian business. The most dynamic sections of business are either already foreign-based or Canadian wannabee's that are themselves increasingly outward-focussed.

The strategic question this raises is what happens if domestic movements to challenge capitalism emerge at the same time as capital itself has no credible *national* project. If a capitalist-worker-consumer alliance is no longer in the cards nationally because there is no nationalist capitalist class, what does this imply for the direction of such oppositional movements? Would their isolation from any significant wing of domestic capital push them, out of necessity even if not out of full conviction, towards more economically radical and inward-oriented domestic alternatives?

From Resistance to Alternative Policies/Structures to Alternative Politics

Naomi Klein, reporting on the 2001 World Social Forum in Port Alegre, wrote that “If Seattle was...the coming-out party of a resistance movement, then [according to Soren Ambrose] ‘Porto Alegre is the coming-out party for the existence of serious thinking about alternatives.’”⁶ If, however, that movement is to move on, that “serious thinking about alternatives” cannot be limited to what an alternative world would look like; it must also address *getting* there. What remains conspicuously absent from the remarkable movements that have emerged is an alternative *politics*. This is, above all, a matter of the movements taking seriously their own descriptions of the scale of what we are up against and discovering — or at least entering into a process to discover — what developing a capacity to match that

“What remains conspicuously absent from the remarkable movements that have emerged is an alternative politics.”

power might mean.

This requires greater attention to national politics. The movement has thus far been internationally oriented, and, while this has been a strength, no internationally focussed movement can sustain itself — let alone fundamentally challenge capitalism — without also sinking the deepest *domestic* roots. Any politics that is anti-capitalist must carry the fight into the national states which remain the ultimate bases of capitalism's power, and any anti-capitalist politics with staying power can only evolve out of the collective experiences and struggles in workplaces, neighbourhoods, universi-

“ Any politics that is anti-capitalist must carry the fight into the national states which remain the ultimate bases of capitalism's power. ”

ties, and within historic communities such as nations. This emphasis on the *domestic* base of an anti-capitalist movement reorients debates around strategy and tactics, the demands to be highlighted, the language used and arguments articulated, the links between particular interests and broader concerns, the nature of the alliance to be developed, and how to wed the international and the domestic.

So, for example, in discussing tactics around the WTO, calling for its abolition is clearly to be supported, but even if accomplished, this would only get us back to the hardly inspiring world of the mid-nineties. Trying to include progressive side-agreements, on the other hand, is naive and dangerously co-optive. Gerard Greenfield has consequently argued that we should generalize the debate to *the exclusion* of certain social needs from commercialization, whether this be inside or outside the WTO.⁷ This simple but powerful proposal links immediate concerns to a critique of capitalism's drive to commodification and reminds us that privatization and deregulation have local bases of class support and are not just external impositions. It thereby also establishes the ideological groundwork and precedents for later expanding the range of what might be excluded from private control.

Similarly, in debating IMF structural adjustment programs, the *unconditional* cancellation of third world debt should, as others have argued, be at the top of the agenda. This does not deny the likelihood of corrupt regimes pocketing the savings for themselves, and it certainly won't in itself solve third world poverty. But modestly curbing our complicity in their poverty represents a gesture of

human solidarity and **does** remove an oppressive constraint on third world development, posing the more fundamental economic/political changes it must address and what kind of world order might support its development.

As for the free trade debate, we must go beyond blocking changes which, again, only get us back to a discredited recent past. It is crucial to aggressively place capital controls on the agenda and any such restrictions on the flow of capital across borders must also address democratic control over what is done with that capital inside our borders. As long as capital retains the threat of disciplining us with the capital collectively produced but privately appropriated, our ability to sustain any gains and therefore expand confidence in future change is frustratingly limited. Such controls, and all the questions they raise, are absolutely fundamental to any serious project of social justice and social change.

Through all of this, the labour movement, with all its flaws and complex diversity, remains absolutely fundamental because of its central location within capitalism. Without labour's material resources (which Andre Gorz has described as a "safety net" for other social movements that have not developed their own independent funding),⁸ without labour's organizational capacity and unique ability to affect the economy (while others protest, labour can shut down capital's life-lines in production and services), without the radicalization of working people and without a working class with a universal sense of social justice — without all of this no movement can sustain hopes of transforming the world.

All of the above — the challenges to commodification, to capitalist priorities and discipline, to contrasting notions of freedom and security — is "anti-capitalist" in that it involves a direct challenge to capitalist property rights. Thomas More, in his literary *Utopia* of some five hundred years ago, noted that reforms that redressed the worst implications of private property, "...would certainly relieve the symptoms, just as a chronic invalid gets some benefit from constant medical attention." But More, unlike our latter-day social democrats, quickly reminded the reader that "...there's no hope for a cure

“ Through all of this, the labour movement, with all its flaws and complex diversity, remains absolutely fundamental because of its central location within capitalism. ”

as long as private property continues.” That view became a fundamental principle of much utopian thought over the ensuing centuries. Long before a full capitalist economy was even conceived, the contradiction between a just society and the exclusivity of private property was presciently understood by More. His protagonist declares: “I’m quite convinced that you’ll never get a fair distribution of goods or a satisfactory organizing of human life, until you abolish private property altogether”.⁹

The Full and Mutual Development of Capacities

Behind this political project lies a particular vision of humanity, a conception of our potential that motivates and guides, a terrain that links means and ends. What makes the human species special, what gives each individual worth and dignity, is not that we are maximizers of easy satisfactions, but that we are all potential *doers, creators of our social life*. We have the ability to imagine what does not exist, and set in motion the energies and capacities to manifest those imaginings. Through that process of affecting the natural and social environment around us, our capacities are further developed

and possibilities expanded; we thereby express the dynamic capacity to change ourselves. Antonio Gramsci, put it most succinctly: “The question ‘What is man?’ is really ‘What can man become?’”¹⁰

This inspires a definition of a socially just society as one that *fosters and encourages the full and mutual development of all the capacities of all members of society*. The terrain of social justice is consequently shifted to that of capacities, development, and potentials. It is not that the equality of distribution, opportunity or freedom emphasized by social democrats or liberal reformers are irrelevant, but that their relevance is to be judged by their contribution to developing “what we can become”, rather than to any fairer access to what we can *have* to compensate us for what we are not.

That “becoming” cannot be separated from the evolution of soci-

“ This inspires a definition of a socially-just society as one that fosters and encourages the full and mutual development of all the capacities of all members of society. ”

ety itself. The above definition speaks of “mutual development” because individual worth is necessarily expressed and realized through society. Our capacities are given life, developed, and magnified through our participation in a collectivity that extends across generations, and involves cooperation and material links with people we have never met or heard of:

No individual human being can fly by flapping his or her arms and legs...Nor could humans fly if a very large number of them assembled in one place and all flapped their arms and legs simultaneously. Yet I did fly to Toronto last year, and the ability to fly was a consequence of social action. Airplanes and airports are products of educational institutions, scientific discoveries, the organization of money, the production of petroleum and its refining metallurgy, the training of pilots, the actions of governments in creating traffic control systems, all of which are social products...note that although flight is a social product, it is not society that flies...Individuals fly. But they fly as a consequence of social organization.¹¹

Early liberalism did of course address capacities. The uniqueness of capitalism as a social system lay, as Karl Marx was himself so ready to concede, in its dazzling development of productive capacities. Liberalism also recognized that such productive forces were a *social* capacity: Adam Smith’s early example of pin-making was, after all, meant to show the remarkable benefits of the social division of labour. But those original insights and directions were predictably narrowed and corrupted by their context. Where the social is rooted in class inequality, private appropriation, individual incentives and pay, impersonal market relations, and divisive competition, why would we be surprised at the cultural outcome? The social retreats into the private and personal; those around us are not recognized as an organic and necessary part of our own success and development, but instead identified as, at best, tolerable others and at worst, as barriers and even threats to our ambitions.

All of this also affects our perspective on democracy. As David

“Where the social is rooted in class inequality, private appropriation, individual incentives and pay, impersonal market relations, and divisive competition, why would we be surprised at the cultural outcome?”

Harvey insists, social justice must also be “justly arrived at.”¹² This is more than a matter of being consistent. The capacity of collectives to work and act democratically is fundamental to both imagining an alternative society and to developing the movements capable of getting us there. Democracy as “people’s power” must be rooted in a sense of each person’s contribution to the social exercise of his/her own powers and the need to develop the potentials of all so they can fully participate in, contribute to, and learn from society. A “democratic practice” must literally involve “practising democracy” so we can learn to maximize our capacities for effective participation.

“Effecting change — as both a goal in itself and an essential tool — demands a generalized capacity to understand the world, why it works the way it does, the openings for responding, and the likely consequences of any serious challenge to the status quo.”

One dimension of this is our approach to knowledge. Effecting change — as both a goal in itself and an essential tool — demands a generalized capacity to understand the world, why it works the way it does, the openings for responding, and the likely consequences of any serious challenge to the status quo. Knowledge is an inherently social undertaking since it necessarily extends beyond any individual. But even so its pursuit is confined to a relative few. A few, partly because of the uneven distribution of skills and time under capitalism and partly because of different interests, have come to specialize in the theoretical and intellectual. But if the point is to use knowledge to change the world, then knowledge and the social capacity to understand must go beyond the majority of people only *receiving* knowledge. It must reach for a universal participation in the development of understanding — a radical *democratization of knowledge*.

This is of course a two-way street. It requires building an interest and confidence among ordinary people in their potential to intellectually grasp the world, an appreciation of the point of conceptual abstraction and complexity, a readiness to overcome, in Gramsci’s words, “the tendency to render easy that which cannot become easy without distortion”.¹³ And it requires that the specialists are integrated into popular struggles in a way that informs and shapes the content and style of their theory. What specialists must learn, for example, is how to communicate technical information for popular

use — what de Sousa Santos, commenting on the alternative budget exercise in Porto Alegre, characterized as the need to move “from technobureaucracy to technodemocracy.”¹⁴ He might have added the importance of academics developing into “academocrats”. More of us should, as Galileo suggests in Brecht’s play, “...write for many in the language of the people, instead of in Latin for the few.”¹⁵

.....It Depends

There is, though, an uncomfortable contradiction in the link between capacities and a just society, and it is based in the very critique of capitalism we have been putting forth. Social justice involves the historically unique project of a subordinate class moving beyond protests to create a new world. The crime of capitalism is that it is based on a systematic frustration and underdevelopment of those same popular capacities needed to transform society. Where then will the necessary capacities come from? If suddenly handed the world, would we know what to do with it? Could we avoid chaos, never mind the more ambitious goal of inventing the capacities to do what has never been done before: collectively and democratically administering a complex society? Could we expect workers tied to concentrating on the minutest details of work and limited by their localism to even imagine that they might replace corporate owners and institutions that have been coordinating the overall productive system, mobilizing finance, analyzing the penetration of global markets, organizing global sources of supply, and investigating how to apply the latest technology or breakthrough in science?

Such questions can’t be avoided. Without some concrete signal in the here and now that such capacities are possible, the movement to build a society supportive of developing capacities will never emerge; the confidence in, and commitment to, creating a new society will simply not manifest itself. The point is that to articulate a faith in capacities is not to assert that their realization is *guaranteed*; only that because of such potentials, the future is *not closed* — it “depends”.

The future is open because for all its coherence, capitalism is itself not a closed system. It allows for private and pub-

“ The future is open because for all its coherence, capitalism is itself not a closed system. ”

lic spaces that can nurture resistance (and are the results of prior resistance). It includes its own ideological and material contradictions that can be, and have been, used to create further openings. Struggles, as heightened moments with openings to new experiences and awareness, are themselves ways of standing outside of the system, even if only partially and temporarily, to create a measure of liberated space. And political organization, more or less conscious of the ultimate goal, can serve to shape resistance so that in the course of struggle, people learn, change, develop a solidaristic culture and mutual empathy, and institutionalize the cumulative building of capacities.

Neoliberalism's greatest victory has been the lowering of expectations and the belittling of what we are capable of. But neoliberalism is also proving vulnerable to the flowering of a new sense of entitlements, solidarities, and possibilities. The old is morally exhausted, though it would be foolish to underestimate its continuing power and economic dynamism. The new is fragmented and sporadic, but as Daniel Singer always reminded us, it would be a betrayal to underestimate its potential.¹⁶ In this contest between the power of the old and the potential of the new, we have a chance to be not just witnesses, but participants.

Endnotes

1. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution*, Vol 1, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 222.
2. John Stuart Mill, quoted in Jonathan Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 196.
3. Fredrich Hayek, *Economic Freedom and Representative Government*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
4. Quoted in G.C. Morris, "Montesquieu and the Varieties of Political Experience" in David Thompson (ed), *Political Ideas*, London: Penguin, 1990.
5. President Nixon himself captured a particular dimension of the period's limits. At that very moment in 1971 when the United States ended the convertability of the dollar and signalled the end of the alleged golden age, Nixon began his address by noting that "...in the past forty years we have only had two years of prosperity without war and without inflation." (Transcript, President Nixon's Address to Congress, in *The New York Times*, September 10, 1971).
6. Naomi Klein, *The Nation*, March 19, 2001.
7. Gerard Greenfield, "The Success of Being Dangerous," *Studies in Political Economy*, Spring, 2001 (See also "A Different Kind of Devastating: From Anti-corporate Populism to Anti-capitalist Alternatives," unpublished).
8. Andre Gorz, *Critique of Economic Reason*, London: Verso, 1989, p. 232-3.
9. Thomas More, *Utopia*, London: Penguin, 1965, p. 66-67.
10. Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and Other Writings*, New York: International Publishers, 1970, p. 76.
11. Richard Lewontin, *Biology as Ideology*, Concord, Ontario: Anansi, 1995, p. 95.
12. David Harvey, *Justice and the City*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1977, p. 97.
13. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, New York: International Publishers, 1997, p. 43.
14. Boaventura de Sousa Santos, "Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre: Towards a Redistributive Democracy," *Politics and Society*, Dec. 1998, pp. 461-510.
15. Bertholt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, New York: Arcade, p. 79.
16. Daniel Singer, *Whose Millennium is it Anyway?*, New York: Monthly Review, 1999.

About the CSJ Foundation For Research and Education

The CSJ Foundation for Research and Education conducts original research, produces training programs, and publishes reports and educational materials on social and economic issues. The Foundation conforms to Revenue Canada's guidelines for charitable activity. Its current program involves research on the growing gap between rich and poor, investigating the corporate influence on public policy, and the search for policy alternatives.

The CSJ Foundation For Research and Education
489 College Street, Suite 303B
Toronto, Ontario, M6G 1A5
Tel: 416-927-0777
Fax: 416-927-7771
Email justice@socialjustice.org
Website: www.socialjustice.org

About the author

Sam Gindin grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba and did his graduate work in Madison, Wisconsin. From 1974 to 2000, he was with the Canadian section of the Auto Workers, first as their Research Director and then later as Assistant to the President. He is currently the Packer Chair in Social Justice at York University, housed in political science. He and Professor Leo Panitch are in the midst of writing a book (a long-term project) tentatively titled *Production, Finance, and Empire: Managing Global Capitalism*.

