

Review of:

Capitalism and Social Democracy, by Adam Przeworski (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

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This brilliant study by Adam Przeworski must surely become mandatory reading not only for anyone who takes his or her socialist commitments seriously but also for anyone who wishes adequately to understand the relationship between class and electoral politics in the countries of advanced capitalism.

The principal burden of Przeworski's intricate and multifaceted analysis of the dilemmas facing social democratic parties in the twentieth century is to show that the decision to participate in electoral politics necessarily constrains the capacity of such parties to effect, through command of the parliamentary system, a transition to socialism. This incapacity turns on the pivotal fact that nowhere (with the possible brief exception of Belgium in 1912) has the industrial working class constituted a majority of the population. In the countries of Western Europe, for example, 'from 1890 to 1980 the proletariat continued to be a minority of the population' (p23). The implications of this fact for parliamentary socialism have been profound, for the essence of the parliamentary system is that, in order to govern, parties must be able to claim representation of an effective majority of the population.

Given the minority status of the industrial working class, those parties claiming to represent it have been forced into securing alliances with other classes - and white collar workers, petite bourgeois, students and retirees have all been targeted as potential allies in the socialist cause. This search for allies has necessarily compromised the socialist content of the programs of working class parties. And, insofar as such parties have chosen to remain 'pure' and narrowly class-based, they have been constrained to function as merely another - if sometimes quite effective - interest group pursuing highly particularistic ends within a capitalist system. As Przeworski puts it: 'The democratic system played a perverse trick on socialist intentions: the emancipation of the working class could not be the task of the workers themselves if this emancipation was to be realized through elections. The only question left was whether a majority for socialism could be recruited by seeking electoral support beyond the working class' (p25). The answer, in effect, has been 'no'. 'Social democrats appear condemned to minority status when they are a class party, and they seem equally relegated when they seek to be the party of the masses, of the entire nation. As a pure party of workers they cannot win the mandate for socialism, but as a party of the entire nation they have not won it either'.

In Przeworski's view, the incapacity of social democratic parties to carry through the project of socialist reconstruction inheres in the very logic of capitalist social and economic relationships. These relationships are such that the cumulative outcome of reforms introduced within the context of a capitalist economy will not be a transformation of that system into one of a fundamentally different kind. Mitigation does not, as Benjamin Barber suggested, become

transformation or attenuation abolition; capitalist 'concessions' do not annihilate capitalism. Rather 'without transformation the need to mitigate becomes eternal' (pp31, 41).

Why, given the standard reformist refrain that the purpose of reform was to usher in a socialist system gradually, should this be so? After all, as Przeworski insists, the original decision to participate was seen as instrumental to this larger purpose of transformation. Even Bernstein's famous assertion that the goal is nothing, the movement everything, did not entail a renunciation of a more distant end. The answer, as already intimated, lies principally in the analysis of the deeper structure of the capitalist system of production, in the complex interaction of the dual phenomena of economic policy and class interests as expressed in the electoral processes of modern capitalist societies. The parliamentary road to socialism leads necessarily to class compromise and to accountability to capitalists for the success or failure of economic policies. The complex, striated system of class and other interests has rendered the simple 'arithmetical' vision of the growth of the proletariat into a majority class, and its party into a parliamentary majority, untenable. Rather, alliances have had to be formed which have necessarily diluted the socialist content of economic policy.

Three factors, in particular, are emphasised in Przeworski's analysis. The first is that some of the more conventional socialist conceptions of the nature of working class behaviour are inadequate. The second is that the viability of any social democratic programme has been contingent upon its ability to secure economic growth and avoid economic crisis and the resultant refusal to invest by capitalists which would hurt both workers and the various groups with which they are in alliance. The third is that, beyond the ambiguous projects of nationalisation and socialisation, parties of the left failed to produce adequate economic policies for a transition to socialism and came to rely on Keynesian-type policies in order effectively to administer a capitalist economy counter-cyclically. They came to embrace an ideology of welfarism and perpetual mitigation rather than one of fundamental transformation, one of 'general' or 'universal' interest (as required by the practice of parliamentarism) rather than one of more narrowly working class interest.

These three elements - and in particular the first two - are closely interwoven in Przeworski's analysis and reflect his approach to the conceptualization of class which is informed by what he openly declares to be a form of methodological individualism (p97). Classes, for Przeworski manifest a certain 'plasticity'; they are not 'given', but result from the choices which *individuals* make. Rather than beginning the analysis from the assumption that class positions are given, we need to 'analyze the entire structure of choice as given to individuals, not to workers. For it may be that there exist conditions under which their choice is to become workers and cooperate with capitalists against other workers and the optimality of this strategy may be incomprehensible if we truncate the choice set by viewing individuals as ready-made workers' (p97). Thus, segmented labour markets which 'imply different structures of choice for people with different individual endowments ... breed disunity among those who become workers'. For Przeworski, the process of class formation is 'perpetual and discontinuous' (p92). It is not, therefore, 'the proletariat that is being formed

into a class: it is a variety of persons some of whom are separated from the system of production' (p90). Furthermore, the processes by which people are formed into a class 'do not take place in a vacuum; rather they are inextricably tied to the totality of processes through which collectivities appear in struggle at particular moments of history' (p90). And, given that the outcomes of these processes are not determined uniquely by the structure of social relations, a number of different outcomes are possible within the limits set by such relations (p90). Thus one might say that for Przeworski the classical Marxian concern to identify the conditions and the means through which the proletariat as a 'class in itself' might be transformed into a 'class for itself' encompasses a serious problem of social ontology. For what indeed, is a 'class in itself' in any clear and unambiguous sense?

Apart from the rich and wide-ranging account of the history of social democratic theory and practice and the highly nuanced discussion of some of the key perspectives on class, Przeworski's analysis shows an unusual sensitivity to the theoretical problems associated with attempts to explain collective action and why hopes of emancipatory working class action cannot rest on easy assumptions about the 'real' identity and community of interests of workers who, either through struggle or through the guidance of a party, will come to recognise, and express in revolutionary action, their world historical mission as the emancipators both of themselves and humankind. Matters are much more complex than that. Short-term interests and immediate material (or other) advantages are not easily foresworn by individuals making individually rational decisions in determinate circumstances of choice. It may be that their decisions are not rational in some larger, 'ultimate' sense but that does not help one to explain the choices that they *do* make and thus the nature of electoral politics in capitalist democracies.

This particular conception of class formation leads Przeworski to develop, in a display of astonishing intellectual virtuosity, a detailed account of the nature of the electoral trade-off by which social democratic politics have been characterized. In particular, 'by broadening their appeal to the middle classes socialist parties dilute the general ideological salience of class and, consequently, weaken the power of class as a *cause* of the political behaviour of workers. When political parties do not mobilize individuals as workers, but as the masses, the people, the nation, the poor or simply as citizens, the people ... are less likely to see the society as composed of classes, less likely to identify themselves as class members, and eventually less likely to vote as workers' (p105, emphasis added). Thus, as 'socialist parties become like other parties, workers turn into voters like other voters', for when 'socialist parties extend their appeal to people other than workers they can no longer represent the interests that constitute the public goods for workers as a class but only those interests which workers share as individuals with other people' (pp105-106). As Przeworski puts it, 'mobilization around non-class issues does not reinforce the causal force of class as a determinant of individual behaviour' (p106).

One of the implications of this, given that workers still constitute the primary constituency for such parties, is that they have had to compete with other parties that mobilize around non-class issues; and their need to maintain the support of

at least substantial segments of their primary constituency has placed constraints on them regarding what they have been able to achieve with respect to mobilization around non-class issues. And this electoral compromise has in a sense been inevitable for, as Przeworski shows, the strategy of keeping the party 'class-pure' was doomed to failure on account of the minority position of the working class. Indeed, as Przeworski suggests, they have seemed 'unable to win either way' (p106).

This electoral trade-off has come, historically, to be expressed in the form of a compromise both in terms of policy and with respect to the role of state. The policies pursued by the state in capitalist societies - the policies designed to invigorate and strengthen the capitalist system of social organization are no longer viewed as the functions of an autonomous state facing the threat of a revolutionary working class. These policies - and the state itself - now appear as an expression of a compromise: they are quite instrumental with regard to the interests of a class coalition that includes both capitalists and organized workers (p202).

The conclusions that Przeworski reaches regarding the prospects for socialism invite serious reflection. First, he does not consider a reversion to Leninist-type strategies to be feasible within the context of advanced capitalism. Second, although he admires the achievements of social democracy in mitigating the effects of capitalism - indeed he believes that 'social democrats have done about as well as they could have under historical circumstances not of their choosing' (p239) - he does not think that social democratic-style reformism can lead advanced capitalist societies to socialism. A principal reason for this is that social democracy has been forced to forge its policies and its projects in terms of the need to maximize the material welfare of its constituency. And this, in a way, discloses the essence of Przeworski's whole enterprise: the struggle for improving capitalism may be as essential as ever before, but it should not be confused with the struggle for socialism. And the struggle for socialism cannot be based on 'economistic' premises about the material interests of workers. 'There is every reason to expect that capitalism will continue to offer an opportunity to improve material conditions and that it will be defended by force where and when it does not, while conditions for socialism continue to rot' (p248). Thus, for as long as socialists attempt to mobilize people around the promise of improved material conditions they are doomed to failure; for Przeworski maintains that the transition to socialism must necessarily involve at least a temporary set-back for workers prepared to commit themselves to its realization. There is no guarantee that in terms of securing their material interests workers would - any more than capitalists - prefer socialism to capitalism. The Pareto superiority of socialism to capitalism for the society as a whole has not been demonstrated and even Marx himself, claims Przeworski, 'certainly believed that revolutions are always improvements in the Pareto sense (even if they may have horrible distributional effects, as in the industrial revolution)' (p236). Indeed, Przeworski suspects that the transition to socialism in terms of the classical models is impossible without a 'valley of transition' being traversed. Such a transition 'must therefore generate an economic crisis. Investment falls sharply, prices increase, nominal wage gains become eroded,

and eventually output falls, demand slackens, unemployment reappears as a major problem' (p46).

Thus, for Przeworski, the movement for socialism must be retrieved from economism and the 'dogmas of the Internationals'. It must be rehabilitated as a movement concerned neither to secure equality nor full employment - neither of which would in his view be relevant to a properly socialist society - but freedom and individual autonomy. The kingdom of socialism is not one in which all its members are fully employed in the toil of industrial production, but one in which the rich person is the person rich in needs that have been fulfilled.

Przeworski lays bare with considerable clarity the dilemmas confronting contemporary socialists. The vision he presents of socialism is a distant, 'utopian' vision, the circumstances for the realization of which are really not to hand. 'This is why dreams of utopia cannot be a substitute for the struggle to make capitalism more efficient and humane. Poverty and oppression are here, and they will not be alleviated by the possibility of a better future' (p248, emphasis added). Socialism is thus the preserve of an enlightened emancipatory discourse. The mundane battles of ordinary workers to make ends meet are unlikely to be the means for its realization.

Przeworski speaks eloquently to the despair experienced by socialists in the age of Thatcher and of Reagan. He also provides a compelling account of the political economy of contemporary capitalist societies and articulates an often ignored vision of socialism as something that transcends narrowly conceived concerns with employment and material well-being. And the prognoses he advances for socialism in our times are not encouraging. It might be, however, that although Przeworski's analysis is largely correct - and I am inclined to believe that for the most part it is - that some of his prognoses and conclusions do not necessarily follow from this analysis. In particular, I am not persuaded that the long-term outcomes of reforms are not without some potentially cumulative, systems-transformatory effect. Nor am I persuaded that the transition to socialism need necessarily involve the traversing of a 'valley of transition'.

I suspect that capitalism will not be the last form in which material production will be organised and I suspect that an ethically higher form of production will evolve from it. However, the manner of its coming will, I suspect, be neither through the work of an insurrectionary party nor through a working class seizure of parliamentary power. Rather it will be through a long, complex and highly dis-articulated set of processes through which the many individual irrationalities of contemporary systems of power will be challenged and transcended. But there will be no single class agent, there will be no coherent and organized assault on these irrationalities as a whole. Rather more or less enlightened visions of individual, group or class interest will merge in complex, sometimes paradoxical and often unintended ways with collective, indeed global, interests. The political and economic forms that historically have come to be regarded as 'natural' features of the modern world - the nation state as the principal object of mass loyalty, hierarchical and environmentally hazardous systems of production, etc - will probably be slowly eroded. The project of modernity (of which the socialist movement is but one important expression) is as yet incomplete as this project has, as its kernel, a rational and evolutionary thrust. In this long historical

process capitalism is likely to be transfigured into something that bears little resemblance to it as presently it is constituted - something that we may wish to call authentic socialism. Of course it might evolve into some nightmarish catastrophe, a ghastly terminus to that illusory prospect of emancipation that has its origins in the Enlightenment. This latter dark outcome I believe is unlikely, but this is not the point at which to justify or further elaborate on my vision. Rather, it is the point at which to conclude by stressing that the importance of Przeworski's work is to force us to confront the limits not only of social democracy but of traditional ways of thinking about socialism.