
Three Socialist Criticisms of Liberalism

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Plan

- 1) Distributive unfairness
 - 2) Internal critique
 - 3) Socialist values
- Aim: to distinguish these criticisms and argue that socialists should commit to 3).
 - NB: These criticisms are not exhaustive or mutually exclusive.

Part 1

1. Distributive unfairness
2. Internal critique
3. Socialist values

Part 1

- One common socialist criticism is that liberalism permits distributive unfairness.
- One way of making this criticism is to distinguish real and formal freedom:
 1. Formal freedom: no legal barriers to X .
 2. Real freedom: no legal barriers to X and various means at my disposal to X .
- The criticism is that liberalism is concerned only with formal freedom and so overlooks the way that material inequality undermine real freedom.

Part 1

- This is a plausible criticism of classical liberalism but has little force against liberal egalitarianism.
- Consider e.g., John Rawls' theory of justice.
- Rawls emphasises the *fair value* of the political liberties: 'all citizens, whatever their social position, may be assured a fair opportunity to exert political influence' (Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, p.148)
- Rawls requires *fair* equality of opportunity: Citizens with the same talents and motivation to use them should enjoy equal chance of obtaining social and economic opportunities.
- The difference principle tolerates inequalities only on the condition that they maximally benefit the worst-off.

Part 1

- However, this doesn't mean that liberalism has “triumphed” over socialism – for two reasons:
 1. It's true that liberal egalitarianism can accommodate this criticism, but this is because liberalism has moved towards socialism.
 2. Socialists have other criticisms of liberalism.

Part 2

1. Distributive unfairness
2. Internal critique
3. Socialist values

Part 2

- The second criticism is an internal critique.
- It begins with the idea that liberals and socialists share the same values: notably a commitment to freedom and equality.
- It then argues that liberals and socialists differ in their view of the society that is necessary to realize those values.
- Specifically, where liberals think that it is possible to enjoy freedom and equality under a suitably regulated form of capitalism, socialists argue these values are inconsistent with capitalism.

Part 2

- “There is no huge gap between liberal egalitarianism and socialism, if we ask what justice requires from an impartial moral perspective. But the demands of justice as fairness cannot be realized by liberal political institutions.” (Lea Ypi, 'The Politics of Reticent Socialism').
- “[T]he normative commitments underlying Marxian social theory and those elaborated by liberal egalitarians broadly coincide. There is no need to go ‘beyond liberal egalitarianism’ in this important dimension.” (Tony Smith, *Beyond Liberal Egalitarianism*, p.341.)
- “[S]ome moderation should be kept in the declaration of war against “liberalism.” It is true that the great liberal movement of modern times arose for the advantage of the capitalist ... But with respect to liberalism as a great historical movement, socialism is its legitimate heir, not only in chronological sequence, but also in its spiritual qualities” (Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*, Ch.3)

Part 2

- Why are freedom and equality inconsistent with capitalism?
- If you're born into a working-class family, you're compelled to work for the duration of your adult life.
- At work, you're subjected to the arbitrary will of your superiors.
- Meanwhile, those with wealth are neither compelled to work nor to obey the directives of anyone else.
- The modern economy is thus characterised by asymmetrical subordination.
- Historically, liberals have been attuned to **political domination**.
- But they have turned a blind eye to wage-labour and have therefore neglected **economic domination**. Thus, most liberals have only been “marginal liberals”.

Part 2

- This criticism has much to be said for it.
- Strategically, it makes sense to focus on areas of overlap between liberalism and socialism.
- Philosophically, internal critique is often thought to be a particular powerful form of critique.
- But, at the same time, the internal criticism can seem somewhat unsatisfying:
 - Reduces disagreement between socialists and liberals to empirical disagreement.
 - Gives up on the idea that socialists have fundamental values of their own.

Part 3

1. Distributive unfairness
2. Internal critique
3. Socialist values

Part 3

- The third criticism is the idea that there are some fundamental socialist values that liberals overlook or undervalue.
- There are different candidates about what these fundamental value might be.
- Historically, the leading candidate was 'equality'. (Hugh Gaitskell: "socialism is about equality").
- On this view, liberals give priority to freedom over equality, whereas the reverse is true for socialists.
- This is wrong: not only because liberal egalitarians are committed to equality but also because socialists are committed to freedom.

Part 3

- A more promising candidate is collective self-government.
- See Engels: the transition to socialism is “the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom . . . Man, at last the master of his own form of social organization, becomes at the same time the lord over Nature, his own master – free” (Engels, *Anti-Dühring*, pp. 82, 86).
- By contrast, liberals tend to be sceptical about collective self-government.
- A virtue of this approach is that it’s easy to draw a link between the value and socialist economic and political arrangements (planning, economic democracy etc.).
- The challenge is showing how it can be realised on a society-wide scale.

Part 3

- In the remainder of this talk, I develop a different version of the “socialist values” critique, one that is based on my reading of the early Marx in *Flourishing Together: Karl Marx’s Vision of the Good Society* (NB: similar ideas are found in the work of Paul Gombert, Barry Maguire, and G.A. Cohen).
- On this view, there are two important socialist values:
- Self-realisation in work and solidarity with others.
- Put together the following way: self-realisation in work involves realising oneself through providing others with the goods and services they need for their flourishing.
- Capitalism thwarts these values, whereas socialism would enable them.

Part 3

- Can liberalism accommodate these values?
- One obstacle is anti-perfectionism.
- Today, most liberals subscribe to the idea that “government must be neutral on what might be called the question of the good life.” (Ronald Dworkin. “Liberalism”, in *Public and Private Morality*, p.127).
- By contrast, the view I have articulated is perfectionist, ethically and politically.

Part 3

- But this view clashes with other fundamental liberal commitments.
- The view requires everyone to have a real opportunity for self-realisation in work.
- This requires us to share socially necessary drudgery.
- Such sharing is inconsistent with the priority of certain basic liberties, such as freedom of occupation, movement, and association.
- The priority of these liberties prevents liberals from reorganising the division of labour, undermining self-realisation in work and solidarity with others.

Conclusion

- I have distinguished three different socialist criticisms of liberalism:
 - 1) Distributive unfairness
 - 2) Internal critique
 - 3) Socialist values
- 1) doesn't have force against the best versions of liberal egalitarianism. This has led many socialists to adopt 2). Socialists should not give up on 3).