

Socialism and Associational Democracy: New Forms of Democratic Socialist Thinking

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Abstract

This thesis is a critical assessment of recent revisions in socialist thought in liberal democratic and advanced capitalist societies. It proposes and elaborates a conception of an 'associational democratic socialism'.

It examines four main areas of recent economic, social and political change to which recent revisions in socialist thought have been a response – 1) the rise of neo-liberalism as a theory and political practice; 2) post-fordist changes in the economy, technology and social structure; 3) the decline of state socialism in Europe, East and West; and 4) the transnationalisation of the economy and politics. It is argued that these developments have undermined traditional statist, nationally autarkic, classist and strongly collectivist conceptions of socialism and pointed towards the need for more liberal and pluralist re-conceptualisations.

Four revisionist models of socialism are analysed – individualist socialism, market socialism, citizenship or radical democratic socialism and associational socialism. The first two are rejected. The third is defended but it is argued that it can only be realised through the institutions implied by the fourth and final version.

The idea of associational democracy is developed as a model of democratic and social organization and contrasted with other such models based on different principles of organization – community, pluralism and the state.

The implications of the concept of associational democracy for the economy and polity are investigated. The principle of economic democracy by all affected interests is argued for as is the case for a pluralist and co-operatively planned economy. The concept of 'the market' is criticised and deconstructed. Various feasible and concrete means for achieving economic democracy are investigated.

The role of decentralized autonomous communities in an associational democracy are analysed as is the structure of the nation-state. Recent 'citizenship democratic' arguments for political and democratic reform are critically assessed and evaluated.

It is argued that nations, nation-states and nationalisms are being undermined and are no longer major political or world-historical forces. However it is also argued that transnational developments have failed to undermine regional provincialism and antagonisms necessitating the need for a more internationally-oriented perspective.

Finally the principles of associationalism and co-operation are explored as they apply to political action, agency and transition. It is argued that such principles imply a coalitional politics. Such a form of politics is defended as liberal, democratic and facilitative of strong and stable government.