THE USES AND ABUSES OF 'CIVIL SOCIETY'

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We live in curious times. Just when intellectuals of the Left in the West have a rare opportunity to do something useful, if not actually world-historic, they – or large sections of them – are in full retreat. Just when reformers in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe are looking to Western capitalism for paradigms of economic and political success, many of us appear to be abdicating the traditional role of the Western left as critic of capitalism. Just when more than ever we need a Karl **Marx** to reveal the inner workings of the capitalist system, or a Friedrich **Engels** to expose its ugly realities 'on the ground', what we are getting is an army of 'post-Marxists' one of whose principal functions is apparently to conceptualize away the problem of capitalism.

The 'post-modem' world, we are told, is a pastiche of fragments and 'difference'. The systemic unity of capitalism, its 'objective structures' and totalizing imperatives, have given way (if they ever existed) to a bricolage of multiple social realities, a pluralistic structure so diverse and flexible that it can be rearranged by discursive construction. The traditional capitalist economy has been replaced by a 'post-Fordist' fragmentation, where every fragment opens up a space for emancipatory struggles. The constitutive class relations of capitalism represent only one personal 'identity' among many others, no longer 'privileged' by its historic centrality. And so on.

Despite the diversity of current theoretical trends on the left and their various means of conceptually dissolving capitalism, they often share one especially serviceable concept: 'civil society'. After a long and somewhat tortuous history, after a series of milestones in the works of **Hegel,** Marx and **Gramsci,** this versatile idea has become an all-purpose catchword for the left, embracing a wide range of emancipatory aspirations, as well – it must be said – as a whole set of excuses for political retreat. However constructive its uses in defending human liberties against state oppression, or in marking out a terrain of social practices, institutions and relations neglected by the 'old' Marxist left, 'civil society' is now in danger of becoming an alibi for capitalism.

The Idea of Civil Society: A Brief Historical Sketch

The current usage of 'civil society' or the conceptual opposition of 'state' and 'civil society', has been inextricably associated with the development of

capitalism. There has certainly been a long intellectual tradition in the West, even reaching back to classical antiquity, which has in various ways delineated a terrain of human association, some notion of 'society', distinct from the body politic and with moral claims independent of, and sometimes opposed to, the state's authority. Whatever other factors have been at work in producing such concepts, their evolution has been from the beginning bound up with the development of private property as a distinct and autonomous locus of social power. For example, although the ancient Romans, like the Greeks, still tended to identify the state with the community of citizens, the 'Roman people', they did produce some major advances in the conceptual separation of state and 'society', especially in the Roman Law which distinguished between public and private spheres and gave private property a legal status and clarity it had never enjoyed before.[1] In that sense, the modem concept of 'civil society', its association with the specific property relations of capitalism, is a variation on an old theme. At the same time, any attempt to dilute the specificity of this 'civil society', to obscure its differentiation from earlier conceptions of 'society', risks disguising the particularity of capitalism itself as a distinct social form with its own characteristic social relations, its own modes of appropriation and exploitation, its own rules of reproduction, its own systemic imperatives.*

The very particular modem conception of 'civil society' – a conception which appeared systematically for the first time in the eighteenth century – is something quite distinct from earlier notions of 'society': civil society represents a separate sphere of human relations and activity, differentiated from the state but neither public nor private or perhaps both at once, embodying not only a whole range of social interactions apart from the private sphere of the household and the public sphere of the state, but more specifically a network of distinctively *economic* relations, the sphere of the market-place, the arena of production, distribution and exchange. A necessary but not sufficient precondition for this conception of civil society was the modem idea of the state as an abstract entity with its own corporate identity, which evolved with the rise of European absolutism; but the full conceptual differentiation of 'civil society' required the emergence of an autonomous 'economy', separated out from the unity of the 'political' and 'economic' which still characterized the absolutist state.

Paradoxically – or perhaps not so paradoxically – the early usages of the term 'civil society' in the birthplace of capitalism, in early modem England, far from establishing an opposition between civil society and the state, conflated the two. In 16th and 17th century English political thought, 'civil society' was typically synonymous with the 'commonwealth' or 'political society'. This conflation of state and 'society' represented the subordination of the state to the community of private-property holders (as against both monarch and 'multitude') which constituted the political nation. It reflected a unique political dispensation, in which the dominant class depended for its

wealth and power increasingly on purely 'economic' modes of appropriation, instead of on directly coercive 'extra-economic' modes of accumulation by political and military means, like feudal rent-taking or absolutist taxation and office-holding as primary instruments of private appropriation.

But if English usage tended to blur the distinction between state and civil society, it was English conditions – the very same system of property relations and capitalist appropriation, but now more advanced and with a more highly developed market mechanism – which made possible the modem conceptual opposition between the two. When **Hegel** constructed his conceptual dichotomy, Napoleon was his inspiration for the 'modem' state; but it was primarily the capitalist economy of England – through the medium of classical political economists like Smith and Steuart – that provided the model of 'civil society' (with certain distinctively Hegelian corrections and improvements). **Hegel's** identification of 'civil' with 'bourgeois' society was more than just a fluke of the German language. The phenomenon which he designated by the term ***burgerliche Gesellschaft*** was a historically specific social **form.** Although this 'civil society' did not refer exclusively to purely 'economic' institutions (it was, for example, supplemented by **Hegel's** modem adaptation of medieval corporate principles), the modem 'economy' was its essential condition. For **Hegel,** the possibility of preserving both individual freedom and the 'universality' of the state, instead of subordinating one to the other as earlier societies had done, rested on the emergence of a new class and a whole new sphere of social existence: a distinct and autonomous 'economy'. It was in this new sphere that private and public, particular and universal, could meet through the interaction of private interests, on a terrain which was neither household nor state but a mediation between the two.

Marx, of course, transformed **Hegel's** distinction between the state and civil society by denying the universality of the state and insisting that the state expressed the particularities of 'civil society' and its class relations, a discovery which compelled him to devote his life's work to exploring the anatomy of 'civil society' in the form of a critique of political economy. The conceptual differentiation of state and civil society was thus a precondition to Mam's analysis of capitalism, but the effect of that analysis was to deprive the Hegelian distinction of its rationale. The state-civil society dualism more or less disappeared from the mainstream of political discourse.

It required Gramsci's reformulation to revive the concept of civil society as a central organizing principle of socialist theory. The object of this new formulation was to acknowledge both the complexity of political power in the parliamentary or constitutional states of the West, in contrast to more openly coercive autocracies, and the difficulty of supplanting a system of class domination in which class power has no clearly visible point of concentration in the state but is diffised throughout society and its cultural practices. Gramsci thus appropriated the concept of civil society to mark out the terrain of a new kind of struggle which would take the battle against capitalism not

only to its economic foundations but to its cultural and ideological roots in everyday life.

The New Cult of Civil Society

Gramsci's conception of 'civil society' was unambiguously intended as a weapon against capitalism, not an accommodation to it. Despite the appeal to his authority which has become a staple of the 'new revisionism', the concept in its current usage no longer has this unequivocally anti-capitalist intent. It has now acquired a whole new set of meanings and consequences, some very positive for the emancipatory projects of the left, others far less so. The two contrary impulses *can* be summed up in this way: the new concept of 'civil society' signals that the left has learned the lessons of liberalism about the dangers of state oppression, but we seem to be forgetting the lessons we once learned from the socialist tradition about the oppressions of civil society. On the one hand, the advocates of civil society are strengthening our defence of non-state institutions and relations against the power of the state; on the other hand, they are tending to weaken our resistance to the coercions of capitalism.

The concept of 'civil society' is being mobilized to serve so many varied purposes that it is impossible to isolate a single school of thought associated with it; but some common dominant themes have emerged. 'Civil society' is generally intended to identify an arena of (at least potential) freedom outside the state, a space for autonomy, voluntary association and plurality or even conflict, guaranteed by the kind of 'formal democracy' which has evolved in the West. The concept is also meant to reduce the capitalist system (or the 'economy') to one of many spheres in the plural and heterogeneous complexity of modem society. The concept of 'civil society' *can* achieve this effect in one of two principal ways. It *can* be made to designate that multiplicity itself as against the coercions of both state and capitalist economy; or, more commonly, it *can* encompass the 'economy' within a larger sphere of a multiple non-state institutions and relations.3 In either case, the emphasis is on the plurality of social relations and practices among which the capitalist economy takes its place as one of many.

The principal current usages – which will be the main focus of this discussion – proceed from the distinction between civil society and state. 'Civil society' is defined by the advocates of this distinction in terms of a few simple oppositions: for example, 'the state (and its military, policing, legal, administrative, productive, and cultural organs) and the non-state (market-regulated, privately controlled or voluntarily organized) realm of civil society';[4] or 'political' vs. 'social' power, 'public' vs. 'private' law, 'state-sanctioned (dis)information and propaganda' vs. 'freely circulated public opinion.'[5] In this definition, 'civil society' encompasses a very wide range of institutions and relations, from households, trade unions, voluntary associations, hospitals, churches, to the market, capitalist enterprises, indeed

the whole capitalist economy. The significant antitheses are simply state and non-state, or perhaps political and social.

This dichotomy apparently corresponds to the opposition between coercion, as embodied in the state, and freedom or voluntary action, which belongs – in principle if not necessarily in practice – to civil society. Civil society may be in various ways and degrees submerged or eclipsed by the state, and different political systems or whole 'historical regions' may vary according to the degree of 'autonomy' which they accord to the non-state sphere. It is a special characteristic of the West, for example, that it has given rise to a uniquely well-developed separation of state and civil society, and hence a particularly advanced form of political freedom.

The advocates of this state-civil society distinction generally ascribe to it two principal benefits. First, it focuses our attention on the dangers of state oppression and on the need to set proper limits on the actions of the state, by organizing and reinforcing the pressures against it within society. In other words, it revives the liberal concern with the limitation and legitimation of political power, and especially the control of such power by freedom of association and autonomous organization within society, too often neglected by the Left in theory and practice. Second, the concept of civil society recognizes and celebrates difference and diversity. Its advocates make *pluralism* a primary good, in contrast, it is claimed, to Marxism, which is, they say, essentially monistic, reductionist, economistic.6 This new pluralism invites us to appreciate a whole range of institutions and relations neglected by traditional socialism in its preoccupation with the economy and class.

The impetus to the revival of this conceptual dichotomy has come from several directions. The strongest impulse is now undoubtedly coming from Eastern Europe, where 'civil society' has become a major weapon in the ideological arsenal of opposition forces against state oppression. Here, the issues are fairly clear: the state – including both its political and economic apparatuses of domination – can be more or less unambiguously set against a (potentially) free space outside the state. The civil society/state antithesis can, for example, be said to correspond neatly to the opposition of Solidarity to Party and State.7

The crisis of the Communist states has, needless to say, also left a deep impression on the Western left, converging with other influences: the limitations of social democracy, with its unbounded faith in the state as the agent of social improvement, as well as the emergence of emancipatory struggles by social movements, not based on class, with a sensitivity to dimensions of human experience all too often neglected by the traditional socialist left. These heightened sensitivities to the dangers posed by the state and to the complexities of human experience have been associated with a wide range of activisms, taking in everything from feminism, ecology and peace, to constitutional reform. Each of these projects has often drawn upon the concept of civil society.

No socialist can doubt the value of these new sensitivities, but there must be serious misgivings about this particular method of focusing our attention on them. We are being asked to pay a heavy price for the all-embracing concept of 'civil society'. This conceptual portmanteau, which indiscriminately lumps together everything from households and voluntary associations to the economic system of capitalism, confuses and disguises as much as it reveals. In Eastern Europe, it can be made to apprehend everything from the defence of political rights and cultural freedoms to the marketization of post-capitalist economies or even the restoration of capitalism. 'Civil society' can serve as a code-word or cover for capitalism, and the market can be lumped together with other less ambiguous goods like political and intellectual liberties as an unequivocally desirable goal.

But if the dangers of this conceptual strategy and of assigning the market to the free space of 'civil society' appear to pale before the enormity of Stalinist oppression in the East, problems of an altogether different order arise in the West, where capitalism does actually exist and where state-oppression is not an immediate and massive evil which overwhelms all other social ills. Since in this case 'civil society' is made to encompass a whole layer of social reality which does not exist in post-capitalist societies, the implications of its usage are in some important respects even more problematic.

Here, the danger lies in the fact that the totalizing logic and the coercive power of capitalism become invisible, when the whole social system of capitalism is reduced to one set of institutions and relations among many others, on a wnceptual par with households or voluntary associations. Such a reduction is, indeed, the principal distinctive feature of 'civil society' in its new incarnation. Its effects is to conceptualize away the problem of capitalism, by disaggregating society into fragments, with no over-arching power structure, no totalizing unity, no systemic coercions – in other words, no capitalist system, with its expansionary drive and its capacity to penetrate every aspect of social life.

It is a typical strategy of the 'civil society' argument – indeed, its *raison d'être* – to attack Marxist 'reductionism' or 'ewnomism'. Marxism, it is said, reduces civil society to the 'mode of production', the capitalist economy. 'The importance of *other* institutions of civil society – such as households, churches, scientific and literary associations, prisons and hospital – is devalued.'[8]

Whether or not Marxists have habitually paid too little attention to these 'other' institutions, the weakness of this juxtaposition (the capitalist economy and 'other institutions' like hospitals?) should be immediately apparent. It must surely be possible even for non-Marxists to acknowledge, for example, the very simple truth that in the West hospitals are situated within a capitalist economy which has profoundly affected the organization of health care and the nature of medical institutions. But is it possible to conceive of an analogous proposition about the effects of hospitals on capitalism? Does Keane's statement mean that Marx did not value households and hospitals, or

is it rather that he did not attribute to them the same historically determinative force? Is there no basis for distinguishing among these various 'institutions' on all sorts of quantitative and qualitative grounds, from size and scope to social power and historical efficacy? In the usage adopted here by John Keane – which is far from atypical – the concept of civil society evades questions like this. It also has the effect of confusing the moral claims of 'other' institutions with their determinative power, or-rather of dismissing altogether the essentially empirical question of historical and social determinations.

There is another version of the argument which, instead of simply evading the systemic totality of capitalism, explicitly denies it. The very existence of other modes of domination than class relations, other principles of stratification than class inequality, other social struggles than class struggle, is taken to demonstrate that capitalism, whose wnstitutive relation is class, is not a totalizing system. The Marxist preoccupation with 'economic' relations and class at the expense of other social relations and identities is understood to demonstrate that the attempt to 'totalize[d] all society from the standpoint of one sphere, the economy or the mode of production,' is misconceived for the simple reason that other 'spheres' self-evidently exist.[9]

This argument is circular and question-begging. To deny the totalizing logic of capitalism, it is not enough merely to indicate the plurality of social identities and relations. The class relation which constitutes capitalism is not, after all, just a personal identity, nor even just a principle of 'stratification' or inequality. It is not only a specific system of power relations but also the wnstitutive relation of a distinctive social process, the dynamic of accumulation and the self-expansion of capital. Of course it can be easily – self-evidently – shown that class is not the only principle of 'stratification', the only form of inequality and domination. But this tells us virtually nothing about the totalizing logic of capitalism. To substantiate the denial of that logic, it would have to be convincingly demonstrated that these other 'spheres' do not come – or not in any significant way – within the determinative force of capitalism, its system of social property relations, its expansionary imperatives, its drive for accumulation, its commodification of all social life, its creation of the market as a necessity, a compulsive mechanism of self-sustaining 'growth', and so on. But 'civil society' arguments (or, indeed, 'post-Marxist' arguments in general) do not typically take the form of historically and empirically refuting the determinative effects of capitalist relations. Instead, (when they do not take the simple circular form: capitalism is not a totalizing system because other spheres exist) they tend to proceed as abstract philosophical arguments, as internal critiques of Marxist theory, or, most commonly, as moral prescriptions about the dangers of devaluing 'other' spheres of human experience.

In one form or another, capitalism is cut down to the size and weight of 'other' singular and specific institutions and disappears into a conceptual night where all cats are grey. The strategy of dissolving capitalism into an

unstructured and undifferentiated plurality of social institutions and relations cannot help but weaken both the analytic and the normative force of 'civil society', its capacity to deal with the limitation and legitimation of power, as well as its usefulness in guiding the 'new social movements'. The current theories occlude 'civil society' in its distinctive sense as a social form specific to capitalism, a systemic totality within which all 'other' institutions are situated and all social forces must find their way, a specific and unprecedented sphere of social power, which poses wholly new problems of legitimation and control, problems not addressed by traditional theories of the state nor by contemporary liberalism.

Capitalism, 'Formal Democracy', and the Specificity of the West

One of the principal charges levelled against Marxism by the advocates of 'civil society' is that it endangers democratic freedoms by identifying Western 'formal democracy' – the legal and political forms which guarantee a free space for 'civil society' – with capitalism: 'civil' = 'bourgeois' society. The danger, they claim, is that we might be tempted to throw out the baby with the bath water, to reject liberal democracy together with capitalism.[10] We should instead, they argue, acknowledge the benefits of formal democracy, while expanding its principles of individual freedom and equality by ***dissociating*** them from capitalism in order to deny that capitalism is the sole or best means of advancing these principles.

It must be said that criticism of contemporary Western Marxism on these grounds must disregard the bulk of Marxist political theory since the sixties, and especially since the theory of the state was revived by the 'Miliband-Poulantzas' debate. Certainly civil liberties were a major preoccupation of both the principals in that controversy, and of many others who have followed in their train. Even the contention that 'classical' Marxism – in the person of Marx or Engels – was too indifferent to civil liberties is open to question. But without reducing this discussion to a merely textual debate about the Marxist ('classical' or contemporary) attitude to 'bourgeois' liberties, let us accept that all socialists, Marxist or otherwise, must uphold civil liberties (now commonly, if somewhat vaguely, called 'human rights'), principles of legality, freedom of speech and association, and the protection of a 'non-state' sphere against incursions by the state. We must acknowledge that some institutional protections of this kind are necessary ***conditions*** of any democracy, even though we may not accept the ***identification*** of democracy with, or its confinement to, the formal safeguards of 'liberalism', and even if we may believe that 'liberal' protections will have to take a different institutional form in socialist democracy than under capitalism.[11]

Difficulties nevertheless remain in the 'civil society' argument. There are other ways (indeed the principal ways in Marxist theory) of associating 'formal democracy' with capitalism than by rejecting the one with the other. We can recognize the historical and structural connections without denying the value

of civil liberties. An understanding of these connections neither compels us to devalue civil liberties, nor does it oblige us to accept capitalism as the sole or best means of maintaining individual autonomy; and it leaves us perfectly free also to acknowledge that capitalism, while in certain historical conditions conducive to 'formal democracy', can easily do without it – as it has done more than once in recent history.

There are, on the contrary, real dangers in failing to see the connections or mistaking their character. There are real dangers in giving an account of Western democracy as an autonomous development, independent of the historical processes which produced capitalism. And the dangers affect both sides of the equation, limiting our understanding of both democracy and capitalism.

The historical and structural connection between formal democracy and capitalism can be formulated in terms of the separation of the state from civil society.[12] Much depends, however, on how we interpret that separation and the historical process which brought it about. There is a view of history, and a concomitant interpretation of the state-civil society separation, which cannot see the evolution of capitalism as anything but progressive. It is a view of history commonly associated with liberalism or 'bourgeois' ideology, but one which seems increasingly to underlie conceptions of democracy on the Left.

Let us sketch the traditional liberal version first. A few essential characteristics stand out: 1) a tendency to view history as a process of progressive individuation, generally associated with the evolution of private property, as communal or 'gentile' institutions and property-forms increasingly give way to more individualized modes of appropriation and consciousness; 2) a conception of the state as a response to this evolution from communal principles to individuality and private property, which calls for new, political institutions to replace old communal forms inadequate to deal with this degree of individuation; 3) a view of history, progress and the evolution of freedom which locates the principle of historical motion in the contradiction between individual and state, or perhaps between state and civil society – as an aggregate of (often mutually antagonistic) individuals – in contrast, for example, to a focus on class contradictions or relations of exploitation; 4) a tendency to identify milestones in the ascent of the propertied classes as the principal landmarks of history: Magna Carta, 1688, the establishment of constitutional principles whose object was to strengthen the hand of the propertied classes against both monarchical power and the multitude.[13] At some critical point, these developments begin to be called 'democratic' – so that, for example, American and European school-children are taught to think of such advances in the power of the landed aristocracy as the pivotal moments in the evolution of democracy. Such a definition of democracy would never have occurred to the major participants in the relevant historical events, for whom consolidating the power of the landed classes was, by definition, for good or for evil, anti-democratic.

Marx himself did not subject the liberal view of history to the same thorough critique that he applied to classical political economy.[14] But from the beginning, there was a different view of history at the core of his own distinctive life's work: history as the development of exploitative relations and the progressive separation of producers from the conditions of labour, property as alienation, the specificity of capitalism and its laws of motion – in short, everything implied by the critique of political economy. What we seem to be witnessing now is a new left version of the old liberal history without this other side.

The historical presuppositions underlying the advocacy of 'civil society' are seldom explicitly spelled out. There is, however, a particularly useful and sophisticated account by a Hungarian scholar, recently published in English in a volume devoted to reviving 'civil society' (East and West), which may serve as a model of the relevant historical interpretation.

In an attempt to characterize three different 'historical regions of Europe' – Western and Eastern Europe and something in between – Jeno Szücs (following Istvan Bibo) offers the following account of the 'Western' model, in 'a search for the deepest roots of a "democratic way of organizing society"'.[15] The most distinctive 'characteristic of the West is the structural – and theoretical – separation of "society" from the "state"'[16], a unique development which lies at the heart of Western democracy, while its corresponding absence in the East accounts for an evolution from autocracy to totalitarianism. The roots of this development, according to Szücs, lie in Western feudalism.

The uniqueness of Western history lay, according to this argument, in 'an entirely unusual "take-off" in the rise of civilizations. This take-off took place amidst disintegration instead of integration, and amidst declining civilization, re-agrarianization and mounting political anarchy.'[17] This fragmentation and disintegration were the preconditions of the separation of 'society' and 'state'. In the high civilizations of the East, where no such separation took place, the political function continued to be exercised 'downwards from above'.

In the process of feudal 'fragmentation' in the West, the old political relations of states and subjects were replaced by new social ties, of a contractual nature, between lords and vassals. This substitution of social-contractual relations for political relations had among its major consequences a new principle of human dignity, freedom and the 'honour' of the individual. And the territorial disintegration into small units each with its own customary law produced a decentralization of law which could resist '"descending" mechanisms of exercising power'.[18] When sovereignty was later reconstructed by the Western monarchies, the new state was essentially constituted 'vertically from below'.[19] It was a 'unity in plurality' that made 'freedoms' the 'internal organizing principles' of Western social structure 'and led to something which drew the line so sharply between the medieval West and many other civilizations: the birth of "society" as an autonomous entity.'[20]

There is much in this argument that is truly illuminating, but equally instructive is the bias in its angle of vision. Here, in fact, are all the staples of liberal history: the progress of civilization (at least in the West) as an unambiguous ascent of individual 'freedom' and 'dignity' (if there is a critical difference between Sziics's account and the traditional liberal view, it is that the latter is more frank about the identification of individuality with private property); the prime focus on the tension between individual or 'society' and the state as the moving force of history; even – and perhaps especially – the tendency to associate the advance of civilization, and democracy itself, with milestones in the ascent of the propertied classes. Although there was nothing democratic about the medieval West, Sziics concedes, this is where the 'deepest roots' of democracy are to be found. It is as if the 'constitutive idea' of modern democracy were *lordship*.

The same **'fragmentation',** the same replacement of political relations by social and contractual bonds, the same **'parcellization'** of sovereignty, the same 'autonomy of society', even while their uniqueness and importance in the trajectory of Western development are acknowledged, can be seen in a different light, with rather different consequences for our appreciation of 'civil society' and the development of Western democracy.

Suppose we look at the same sequence of events from a different angle. The divergence of the 'West' from the 'Eastern' pattern of state-formation began, of course, much earlier than medieval feudalism. It could be traced as far back as early Greek antiquity, but for our purposes a critical benchmark can be identified in ancient **Rome[21].** This divergence, it needs to be stressed, had to do not only with political forms but above all with modes of appropriation – and here developments in the Roman system of private property were decisive. (It is a curious but 'symptomatic' feature of Sziics's argument that modes of appropriation and exploitation do not figure centrally, if at all, in his differentiation of the three historical regions of Europe – which may also explain his insistence on a radical break between antiquity and feudalism. At the very least, the survival of Roman law, the quintessential symbol of the Roman property regime, should have signalled to Sziics some fundamental continuity between the Western 'autonomy' of civil society and the Roman system of appropriation.)

Rome represents a striking contrast to other 'high' civilizations – both in the ancient world and centuries later – where access to great wealth, to the surplus labour of others on a large scale, was typically achieved through the medium of the state (for example, late-imperial China, which had a highly developed system of private property but where great wealth and power resided not in land so much as in the state, in the bureaucratic hierarchy whose pinnacle was the court and imperial officialdom). Rome was distinctive in its emphasis on private property, on the acquisition of massive land-holdings, as a means of appropriation. The Roman aristocracy had an insatiable appetite for land which created unprecedented concentrations of wealth and a predatory

imperial power unrivalled by any other ancient empire in its hunger not simply for tribute but for *territory*. And it was Rome which extended its regime of private property throughout a vast and diverse empire, governed without a massive bureaucracy but instead through a 'municipal' system which effectively constituted a federation of local aristocracies. The result was a very specific combination of a strong imperial state and a dominant propertied class autonomous from it, a strong state which at the same time encouraged, instead of impeding, the autonomous development of private property. It was Rome, in short, which firmly and self-consciously established private property as an autonomous locus of social power, detached from, while supported by, the state.

The 'fragmentation' of feudalism must be seen in this light, as rooted in the privatization of power already inherent in the Roman property system and in the Empire's fragmented 'municipal' administration. When the tensions between the Roman imperial state and the autonomous power of private property were finally resolved by the disintegration of the central state, the autonomous power of property remained. The old political relations of rulers and subjects were gradually dissolved into the 'social' relations between lords and vassals, and more particularly, lords and peasants. In the institution of lordship, political and economic powers were united as they had been where the state was a major source of private wealth; but this time, that unity existed in a fragmented and privatized form.

Seen from this perspective, the development of the West can hardly be viewed as simply the rise of individuality, the rule of law, the progress of freedom or power from 'below'; and the autonomy of 'civil society' acquires a different meaning. The very developments described by Szücs in these terms are also, and at the same time, the evolution of new forms of exploitation and domination (the constitutive 'power from below' is, after all, the power of lordship), new relations of personal dependence and bondage, the privatization of surplus extraction and the transfer of ancient oppressions from the state to 'society' – that is, a transfer of power relations and domination from the state to private property. This new division of labour between state and 'society' also laid a foundation for the increasing separation of private appropriation from public responsibilities which came to fruition in capitalism.

Capitalism then represents the culmination of a long development, but it also constitutes a qualitative break (which occurred 'spontaneously' only in the particular historical conditions of England). Not only is it characterized by a transformation of social power, a new division of labour between state and private property or class, but it also marks the creation of a completely new form of coercion, the market – the market not simply as a sphere of opportunity, freedom, and choice, but as a compulsion, a necessity, a social discipline, capable of subjecting all human activities and relationships to its requirements.

'Civil Society' and the Devaluation of Democracy

It is not, then, enough to say that democracy can be expanded by detaching the principles of 'formal democracy' from any association with capitalism. Nor is it enough to say that capitalist democracy is incomplete, one stage in an unambiguously progressive development which must be perfected by socialism and advanced beyond the limitations of 'formal democracy'. The point is rather that the association of capitalism with 'formal democracy' represents a contradictory unity of advance and retreat, both an enhancement and a devaluation of democracy.* To put it briefly, capitalism has been able to tolerate an unprecedented distribution of political goods, the rights and liberties of citizenship, because it has also for the first time made possible a form of citizenship, civil liberties and rights which can be abstracted from the distribution of social power. In this respect, it contrasts sharply with the profound transformation of class power expressed by the original Greek conception of democracy as rule by the demos, which represented a specific distribution of class power summed up in Aristotle's definition of democracy as rule by the poor. Access to political rights in societies where surplus extraction occurs by 'extra-economic' means and the power of economic exploitation is inseparable from juridical and political status and privilege has a very different meaning from what it does in capitalism, with its expropriated direct producers and a form of appropriation not directly dependent on juridical or political standing. In other words, in Athens, where citizenship remained a critical determinant in relations of exploitation, there could be no such thing as purely 'formal' political rights or purely 'formal' equality. It was capitalism which for the first time made possible a purely 'formal' political sphere, with purely 'political' rights and liberties.

That historical transformation laid the foundation for a redefinition of the word 'democracy'. If capitalism made this reconceptualization possible, political developments in a sense made it necessary. As it became more difficult for dominant classes simply to denounce democracy, with the intrusion of the 'masses' into the political sphere, the concept of democracy began to lose its social connotations, in favour of essentially procedural or 'formal' criteria. The concept was, in other words, domesticated, made acceptable to dominant classes who could now claim commitment to 'democratic' principles without fundamentally endangering their own dominance. Now, the purely 'formal' principles of liberalism have come to be ***identified*** with democracy. In other words, these formal principles are treated not simply as good in themselves, nor even as necessary conditions for democracy in the literal sense of popular rule, but as synonymous with it or as its outer limit. More than that, it has now become possible even to describe undemocratic practices – like the restriction of trade union rights by Thatcher or Reagan – as democratic, while denouncing 'extra-parliamentary' popular politics as 'undemocratic'. 'Formal democracy', in shoat, certainly represents an

improvement on political forms lacking civil liberties, the rule of law and the principle of representation. But it is also, equally and at the same time, a subtraction from the substance of the democratic idea, and one which is historically and structurally associated with **capitalism.**[23]

The 'civil society' argument insists that we should not allow our conception of human emancipation to be constrained by the identification of 'formal democracy' with capitalism. Yet the irony is that this very argument, by obscuring the connections, may have the effect of allowing capitalism to limit our conception of democracy. And if we think of human emancipation as little more than an extension of liberal democracy, then we may in the end be persuaded to believe that capitalism is after all its surest guarantee.

The separation of the state and civil society in the West has certainly given rise to new forms of freedom and equality, but it has also created new modes of domination and coercion. One way of characterizing the specificity of 'civil society' as a particular social form unique to the modem world – the particular historical conditions which made possible the modem distinction between state and civil society – is to say that it constituted a new form of social power, in which many coercive functions that once belonged to the state were relocated in the 'private' sphere, in private property, class exploitation, and market imperatives. It is,, in a sense, this 'privatization' of public power which has created the historically novel realm of 'civil society'. 'Civil society' constitutes not only a wholly new relation between 'public' and 'private' but more precisely a wholly new 'private' realm, with a distinctive 'public' presence and oppressions of its own, a unique structure of power and domination, and a ruthless systemic logic. It represents a particular network of social relations which does not simply stand in opposition to the coercive, 'policing' and 'administrative' functions of the state but represents the relocation of these functions, a new division of labour between the 'public' sphere of the state and the 'private' sphere of capitalist property and the imperatives of the market, in which appropriation, exploitation and domination are detached from public authority and social responsibility.

'Civil society' has given private property and its possessors a command over people and their daily lives, a power accountable to no one, which many an old tyrannical state would have envied.'' Those activities and experiences which fall outside the immediate command structure of the capitalist enterprise, or outside the political power of capital, are regulated by the dictates of the market, the necessities of competition and profitability. Even when the market is not, as it commonly is in advanced capitalist societies, merely an instrument of power for giant conglomerates and multinational corporations, it is still a coercive force, capable of subjecting all human values, activities and relationships to its imperatives. No ancient despot could have hoped to penetrate the personal lives of his subjects – their choices, preferences, and relationships – in the same comprehensive and minute detail, not only in the workplace but in every comer of their lives. Coercion, in other words,

has been not just a ***disorder*** of 'civil society' but one of its constitutive principles.

This historical reality tends to undermine the neat distinctions required by current theories which ask us to treat civil society as, at least in principle, the sphere of freedom and voluntary action, the antithesis of the irreducibly coercive principle which intrinsically belongs to the state. These theories do, of course, acknowledge that civil society is not a realm of perfect freedom or democracy. It is, for example, marred by oppression in the family, in gender relations, in the workplace, by racist attitudes, homophobia, and so on. But these oppressions are treated as ***dysfunctions*** in civil society. In principle, coercion belongs to the state while civil society is where freedom is rooted, and human emancipation, according to these arguments, consists in the autonomy of civil society, its expansion and enrichment, its liberation from the state, and its protection by formal democracy. What tends to disappear from view, again, is the relations of exploitation and domination which irreducibly ***constitute*** civil society, not just as some alien and correctible disorder but as its very essence, the particular structure of domination and coercion that is specific to capitalism as a systemic totality.

The New Pluralism and the Politics of 'Identity'

The rediscovery of liberalism in the revival of civil society thus has two sides. It is admirable in its intention of making socialists more sensitive to civil liberties and the dangers of state oppression. But the cult of civil society also tends to reproduce the mystifications of liberalism, disguising the coercions of civil society and obscuring the ways in which state oppression itself is rooted in the exploitative and coercive relations of civil society. What, then, of its dedication to ***pluralism?*** How does the concept of civil society fare in dealing with the diversity of social relations and 'identities'?

It is here that the cult of civil society, its representation of civil society as the sphere of difference and diversity, speaks most directly to the dominant preoccupations of the new new left. If **anything** unites the various 'new revisionisms' – from the most abstruse 'post-Marxist' and 'post-modernist' theories to the activisms of the 'new social movements' – it is an emphasis on diversity, 'difference', pluralism. The new pluralism goes beyond the traditional liberal recognition of diverse interests and the toleration (in principle) of diverse opinions in three major ways: 1) its conception of diversity probes beneath the externalities of 'interest' to the psychic depths of 'subjectivity' or 'identity' and extends beyond political 'behaviour' or 'opinion' to the totality of 'life-styles'; 2) it no longer assumes that some universal and undifferentiated principles of right can accommodate all diverse identities and life-styles (women, for example, require different rights from men in order to be free and equal); 3) the new pluralism rests on a view that the essential characteristic, the historical ***differentia specifica***, of the contemporary world – or, more specifically, the contemporary capitalist

world – is not the totalizing, homogenizing drive of capitalism but the unique heterogeneity of 'post-modern' society, its unprecedented degree of diversity, even fragmentation, requiring new, more complex pluralistic principles.

The arguments run something like this: contemporary society is characterized by an increasing fragmentation, a diversification of social relations and experiences, a plurality of life-styles, a multiplication of personal identities. In other words, we are living in a 'post-modern' world, a world in which diversity and difference have dissolved all the old certainties and all the old universalities. (Here, some post-Marxist theories offer an alternative to the concept of civil society by insisting that it is no longer possible to speak of society at all, because that concept suggests a closed and unified totality.[25]) Old solidarities – and this, of course, means especially class solidarities – have broken down, and social movements based on other identities and against other oppressions have proliferated – having to do with gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on. At the same time, these developments have vastly extended the scope of individual choice, in consumption patterns and life-styles. This is what some people have called a tremendous expansion of 'civil society'.[26] The Left, the argument goes, needs to acknowledge these developments and build on them. It needs to construct a politics based on this diversity and difference. It needs both to celebrate difference and to recognize the plurality of oppressions or forms of domination, the multiplicity of emancipatory struggles. The Left needs to respond to this multiplicity of social relations with complex concepts of equality, which acknowledge people's different needs and experiences.[27]

There are variations on these themes, but in broad outline, this is a fair summary of what has become a substantial current on the left. And the general direction in which it is pushing us is to give up the idea of socialism and replace it with – or at least subsume it under – what is supposed to be a more inclusive category, democracy, a concept which does not 'privilege' class, as traditional socialism does, but treats all oppressions equally.

Now as a very general statement of principle, there are some admirable things here. No socialist can doubt the importance of diversity, or the multiplicity of oppressions that need to be abolished. And democracy is – or ought to be – what socialism is about. But an emancipatory theory is more than just a statement of general principles and good intentions. It also involves a critical view of the world as it is, a map of the existing terrain which informs our understanding of the obstacles to be overcome, an insight into the conditions of struggle. And an emancipatory theory takes us beyond the limiting and mystifying ideological categories which support existing dominations and oppressions.

What, then, does the cult of civil society tell us about the world as it is? How far does it take us beyond the ideological limits of current oppressions? We can test the limits of the new pluralism by exploring the implications of its constitutive principle. What we are looking for is a general concept which

can encompass–equally and without prejudice or privilege – everything from gender to class, from ethnicity or race to sexual preference. For lack of a better word, let us call it by its currently most fashionable name, 'identity'.

For the sake of brevity, we ***can*** assess the value of this all-embracing concept (or any analogous one) by conducting a thought experiment. Imagine a democratic community which acknowledges all kinds of difference, of gender, culture, sexuality, which encourages and celebrates these differences, but without allowing them to become relations of domination and oppression. Imagine these diverse human beings united in a democratic community, all free and equal, without suppressing their differences or denying their special needs. Now try to think in the same terms about ***class*** differences. Is it possible to imagine class differences without exploitation and domination? Does our imaginary democratic society celebrate class differences as it does diversities of life styles, culture, or sexual preference? Can we construct a conception of freedom or equality which accommodates class as it does gender differences? Would a conception of freedom or equality which ***can*** accommodate class differences satisfy our conditions for a democratic society?

There are serious problems in the concept of identity as applied to any of these social relations, but there is a particular problem in the case of class. When I perform this thought experiment, the results I get for class are very different from those I get for other 'identities'. I can conceive of a democratic society with gender or ethnic diversity, but a democracy with class difference seems to me a contradiction in terms. This already suggests that some important differences are being concealed in a catch-all category like 'identity' which is meant to cover very diverse social relations like class, gender or ethnicity.

But let us go on to the connection between the concept of identity and the idea of equality, and consider the notion of a 'complex' or pluralist equality which purports to accommodate diversity and difference. What happens when we try to apply the concept of equality to various different forms of domination? Clearly, class equality means something different and requires different conditions from gender or racial equality. In particular, the abolition of class inequality would by definition mean the end of capitalism. But is the same necessarily true about the abolition of gender or racial inequality? Gender and racial equality are not in principle incompatible with capitalism. The disappearance of class inequalities, on the other hand, by definition is incompatible with capitalism. At the same time, although class exploitation is ***constitutive*** of capitalism as gender or racial inequality are not, capitalism subjects ***all*** social relations to its requirements. It can co-opt and reinforce inequalities and oppressions which it did not create and use them in the interests of class exploitation.[28]

How should we deal theoretically with these complex realities? One possibility is to retain a concept of equality that does not raise the problem of capitalism – perhaps the old liberal concept of ***formal*** legal and political

equality, or some notion of so-called 'equality of opportunity', which presents no fundamental challenge to capitalism and its system of class relations. This concept of equality gives no privileged status to class. It may even have radical implications for gender or race, because in respect to these differences, no capitalist society has yet reached the limits even of the restricted kind of equality which capitalism allows. But formal equality cannot have the same radical implications for class differences in a capitalist society. In fact, it is a specific feature of capitalism that it has created a particular kind of universal equality *without* such radical implications – that is, precisely, a formal equality, having to do with political and legal principles and procedures rather than with the disposition of social or class power. Formal equality in this sense would have been impossible in pre-capitalist societies where appropriation and exploitation were inextricably bound up with juridical, political and military power.

If the liberaldemocratic conception of formal equality seems unsatisfactory, what about 'complex' or 'pluralist' conceptions as a way of dealing with diverse inequalities in a capitalist society without 'privileging' class? These differ from the liberal-democratic idea in that they are directed at a whole range of social inequalities (including class) but also in that they acknowledge the complexities of social reality by applying different criteria of equality to different circumstances and relations. In this respect, pluralist notions of this kind may have certain advantages over more universalistic principles, even if they may lose some of the benefits of such universal standards.[29] The trouble is that these 'complex' or 'pluralistic' conceptions beg the question of capitalism because they fail to deal with its overarching totality as a social system, which is *constituted* by class exploitation but which shapes all our social relations.

There is another possibility: to differentiate not less but much more radically among various kinds of inequality and oppression than even the new pluralism allows. We can acknowledge that, while all oppressions may have equal moral claims, class exploitation has a different *historical* status, a more strategic location at the heart of capitalism; and class struggle may have a more universal reach, a greater potential for advancing not only class emancipation but other emancipatory struggles too. But this is just the kind of differentiation the new pluralism will not permit, because it suggests that class is somehow privileged. If we want, then, to avoid giving class any kind of privileged historical status, if we want to avoid differentiating in this way among different inequalities, we shall have to accommodate ourselves to capitalism; and we shall also be obliged very drastically to limit our emancipatory project. Is that really what we want?

It is possible that the new pluralism, like other 'new revisionisms', is leaning toward the acceptance of capitalism, at least as the best social order we are likely to get. The crisis of the post-capitalist states has undoubtedly done

more than anything else to encourage the spread of this view. At least, it has become increasingly common to argue that, however pervasive capitalism may be, its old rigid structures have more or less disintegrated, or become so permeable, opened up so many large spaces, that people are free to construct their own social realities in uprecedented ways. That is precisely what some people mean when they talk about the vast expansion of civil society in modem ('post-Fordist'?) capitalism.[30]

But even if we stop short of openly embracing capitalism, we can simply evade the issue. That is the effect of all-purpose concepts like 'identity' or 'civil society' as they are currently used. The capitalist system, its totalizing unity, can be conceptualized away by adopting loose conceptions of civil society or by submerging class, in catch-all categories like 'identity' and by disaggregating the social world into particular and separate realities. The social relations of capitalism can be dissolved into an unstructured and fragmented plurality of identities and differences. Questions about historical causality or political efficacy can be side-stepped, and there is no need to ask how various identities are situated in the prevailing social structure because the existence of the social structure can be denied altogether.

In a sense, the concept of 'identity' has simply replaced the 'interest groups' of pluralist theories in conventional political science, whose object was to deny the importance of class in capitalist democracies. According to both the old and the new pluralisms 'interest groups' or 'identities' are separate but equal, or at least equivalent, ***plural*** rather than ***different.*** And our democracy is a kind of market-place where these interests or identities meet and compete, though they may come together in loose alliances or political parties. Both pluralisms, of course, have the effect of denying the systemic unity of capitalism, or its very existence as a social system; and both insist on the heterogeneity of capitalist society, while losing sight of its increasingly global power of homogenization.

The irony is that the new pluralism, with its demand for complex ideas of freedom and equality which acknowledge the multiplicity of oppressions, ends up by ***homogenizing*** these differences. What we get is ***plurality*** instead of difference. And here is an even more curious paradox. One of the distinctive features of the new social movements is supposed to be their focus on ***power,*** an antagonism to all power relations in all their diverse forms. Yet here, in these theories one of whose principal claims is their capacity to speak for the new social movements, we find a conceptual framework which, just like the old pluralism, has the effect of making invisible the power relations which constitute capitalism, the dominant structure of coercion which reaches into every comer of our lives, public and private.

The final irony is that this latest denial of capitalism's systemic and totalizing logic is in some respects a reflection of the very thing which it seeks to deny. The current preoccupation with 'post-modem' diversity and fragmentation undoubtedly expresses a reality in contemporary capitalism, but it is a reality

seen through the distorting lens of ideology. It represents the ultimate 'commodity fetishism', the triumph of 'consumer society', in which the diversity of 'life-styles', measured in the sheer quantity of commodities and varied patterns of consumption, disguises the underlying systemic unity, the imperatives which create that diversity itself while at the same time imposing a deeper and more global homogeneity.

What is alarming about these theoretical developments is not that they violate some doctrinaire Marxist prejudice concerning the privileged status of class. Of course, the whole object of the exercise is to side-line class, to dissolve it in all-embracing categories which deny it any privileged status, or even any political relevance at all. But that is not the real problem. The problem is that theories which do not differentiate – and, yes, 'privilege', if that means ascribing causal or explanatory priorities – among various social institutions and 'identities' cannot deal critically with capitalism at all. The consequence of these procedures is to sweep the whole question under the rug. And whither capitalism, so goes the socialist idea. Socialism is the specific alternative to capitalism. Without capitalism, we have no need of socialism; we can make do with very diffuse and indeterminate concepts of democracy which are not specifically opposed to any identifiable system of social relations, in fact do not even recognize any such system. What we are left with then is a fragmented plurality of oppressions and a fragmented plurality of **emancipatory** struggles. Here is another irony: what claims to be a more universalistic project than traditional socialism is actually less so. Instead of the universalist project of socialism and the integrative politics of the struggle against class exploitation, we have a plurality of essentially disconnected particular struggles.

This is a serious business. Capitalism is constituted by class exploitation, but capitalism is more than just a system of class oppression. It is a ruthless totalizing process which shapes our lives in every conceivable aspect, and everywhere, not just in the relative opulence of the capitalist North. Among other things, and even leaving aside the sheer power of capital, it subjects all social life to the abstract requirements of the market, through the commodification of life in all its aspects. This makes a mockery of all our aspirations to autonomy, freedom of choice, and democratic self-government. For socialists, it is morally and politically unacceptable to advance a conceptual framework which makes this system invisible, or reduces it to one of many fragmented realities, just at a time when the system is more pervasive, more global than ever.

The replacement of socialism by an indeterminate concept of democracy, or the dilution of diverse and different social relations into catch-all categories **like** 'identity' or 'difference', or loose conceptions of 'civil society', represent a ***surrender*** to capitalism and its ideological mystifications. By all means let us have diversity, difference, and pluralism; but not this kind of ***undifferentiated*** and unstructured pluralism. What we need is a pluralism which does indeed

acknowledge diversity and difference – and that means not just ***plurality*** or ***multiplicity.*** It means a pluralism which also **recognizes** historical realities, which does not deny the systemic unity of capitalism, which can tell the difference between the constitutive relations of capitalism and ***other*** inequalities and oppressions with ***different*** relations to capitalism, a ***different*** place in the systemic logic of capitalism, and therefore a different role in our struggles against it. The socialist project should be ***enriched*** by the resources and insights of the new social movements, not **impoverished** by resorting to them as an excuse for disintegrating the struggle against capitalism. We should not confuse respect for the plurality of human experience and social struggles with a complete dissolution of historical causality, where there is nothing but diversity, difference, and contingency, no unifying structures, no logic of process, no capitalism and therefore no negation of it, no universal project of human emancipation.

Postscript

In the face of the current crisis in the post-capitalist world, it is easy for the Western left to lose its nerve. We certainly have a lot of rethinking to do. But while we are about it, the apologists of capitalism are having a field day. There could hardly have been a more welcome and timely diversion from various troubles at home. There is nothing like the trumpet of triumphalism to drown out the womsome noises from our own backyard. The very wildness of these triumphalist pronouncements should make us suspicious. Not just the triumph of capitalism or liberal democracy over socialism, long before the game is over, but even the end of history?[31]

Of course Stalinism was a disaster for the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and the whole socialist movement. But let us put things into perspective. In the 'richest country in the world', the capital city is riddled with poverty and crime, as sleek civil servants cohabit with beggars. In the first half of 1989, the infant mortality rate in Washington D.C. apparently rose by 40% over the previous year, in large part because of the spread of crack-cocaine addiction. At 32.3 deaths per **1000** births, this mortality rate exceeds, among others, those of China, Chile, Jamaica, Mauritius, Panama, and Uruguay, according to World Bank statistics. One end of the country is dominated by a city, New York, the heartland of the nation's wealth, where unparalleled **luxury** coexists with the most abject squalor, poverty, crime, drug addiction and homelessness. At the other end, in **Los** Angeles, the city's core is being eaten away by drugs and gang-warfare, while privileged whites increasingly retreat into fortified enclaves where every manicured lawn sports a notice that its owner is protected by one of many and multiplying security services, with the menacing announcement: 'Armed Response'. In many places, the school system is a shambles, producing illiterate graduates; and millions of Americans cannot afford health care. It is estimated that 20 million workers in the US take illegal drugs (not to mention many

more with alcohol problems), and that drug and alcohol abuse is costing US companies more than $100 billion a year *(Guardian,* November 17, 1989). In Britain, the birthplace of capitalism, under a government more implacably committed than any other to the values of 'free enterprise', the infrastructure crumbles, mass unemployment persists, public services decline, education even at the primary level becomes less accessible, and squalor deepens, while the poor and homeless multiply. The much vaunted 'economic miracle' in Italy has spawned a large and growing population of near-slaves in the form of Third World immigrants, many of them illegal, who have become the objects of yet another lucrative trade for the Mafia. In Japan, the well-spring of consumerism, ordinary citizens typically work longer hours than in any other developed country, live in postage-stamp-size flats, and take no holidays. As I write, here in prosperous Toronto, the richest city in Canada, one of the city's two major newspapers is conducting a food drive to feed the hungry – not in Ethiopia, but in Metropolitan Toronto, where property developers are making a killing while people go hungry because 70% of their income goes to pay impossibly high rents. The Daily Bread Food Bank, representing 175 emergency food programmes, today helpfully supplied paper bags with every newspaper, inscribed with the following information: '217,000 people a year [84,000 a month, according to the Toronto Star] in Metro need food help [out of a population of about 3.4 million]. Half of them have gone without food for a day or more. One Metro [Metropolitan Toronto] child in seven belongs to a family who needed food help last year. Daily Bread now distributes as much food in a week as it did in all 1984.'

And that is just in the prosperous comers of capitalism. If these are the successes of capitalism, what standards should we use in comparing its failures to those of the communist world? Would it be an exaggeration to say that more people live in abject poverty and degradation within the ambit of capitalism than in the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe? How should we weigh the well-fed and highly educated East Germans streaming into the West against, say, the shanty-town dwellers of São Paolo or the rubber-tappers of the Amazon – or, for that matter, against the millions in advanced capitalist countries who 'escape' from intolerable conditions by means of drug addiction and violent crime? (In fact, maybe we need to consider how to balance such apolitical reactions to the oppressions of 'civil society' against political resistance to a repressive state.) And if anyone objects that East Germany vs. Brazil is not comparing like with like, perhaps they should consider the 'third-world' areas of the Soviet Union itself. How about Tashkent as against Calcutta? Or what about this: if destruction of the environment in the post-capitalist world has resulted from gross neglect, massive inefficiency, and a reckless urge to catch up with Western industrial development in the shortest possible time, how are we to judge this against the capitalist West, where a far more wide-ranging

ecological vandalism is not an index of failure but a token of success, the inevitable by-product of a system whose constitutive principle is the subordination of all human values to the drive for accumulation and the requirements of profitability?

Solidarity's new minister of finance, seeking a model for the regeneration of Poland, looks to South Korea, a repressive regime whose 'human rights' record hardly represents an improvement over that of the regime which Solidarity was so keen to replace, and whose economic 'miracle' was achieved by means of a low-wage economy, with a working class even more overexploited and overworked than the Japanese (never mind that Poland, if the project of 'restoring capitalism' works at all, may turn out to be not a 'successful' South Korea but a squalid peripheral capitalism on a Latin American model). It is perhaps time for us in the West to tell a few home truths about capitalism, instead of hiding them discreetly behind the screen of 'civil society'.

NOTES

For an argument that the Romans, specifically in the person of Cicero, had a concept of 'society', see Neal Wood, *Cicero's Social and Political Thought,* Berkeley and Los Angeles 1988, esp. pp. 136–42.

Much of John Keane's argument in *Democracy and Civil Society,* London 1988, is, for example, predicated on a criticism of Marxism for its identification of 'civil society' with capitalism, which he opposes by invoking the long tradition of conceptions of 'society' in the West.

Something like the first conception can, for example, be extracted from Jean L. Cohen, *Class and Civil Sociefy: The Limits of Marxian Critical Theory,* Amherst 1982. The second view is elaborated by John Keane in *Democracy and Civil Society.* (For his criticism of Cohen's conception, see p. 86n.)

4. John Keane ed., *Civil Society and the State,* London 1988, p. 1.
5. Keane, *Civil Society and the State,* p. 2.
6. Norman Geras debunks such myths about Marxism in this volume.
7. For the application of 'civil society' to events in Poland, see Andrew Arato, 'Civil Society Against the State: Poland 1980–81', *Telos* 47, 1981, and 'Empire versus Civil Society: Poland 1981–82', *Telos* 50,1982.
8. Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society,* p. 32.
9. Cohen, p. 192.
10. See, for example, Cohen, p. 49; Keane, *Democracy and Civil Society,* p. 59; Agnes Heller, 'On Formal Democracy', in Keane, *Civil Sociefy and the State,* p. 132.
11. I have discussed these points at greater length in my *The Retreat from Class: A New 'True' Socialism,* London 1986, chap. 10.
12. The rest of this section is drawn largely from a paper delivered at the Roundtable 'Socialism in the World', Cavtat, Yugoslavia, October 1988.
13. The tendency to conflate aristocratic 'constitutionalist' principles with democracy is very widespread and not confined to the English language. Another notable example is the canonization of the Huguenot resistance tracts, in particular the *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos,* as classics of democratic political thought, when they more precisely represent the reassertion of feudal rights especially by lesser provincial nobles – those who benefitted least from the favours of the

Court and from access to high state office – against an encroaching monarchy. 'Constitutionalism' has, in fact, historically often been aristocratic, even feudal, in its motivations; and while this does not disqualify it as an important contribution to the development of 'limited' and 'responsible' government, a certain caution should attend any effort to identify it with 'democracy'.

14. For a powerful discussion of this point, see Gwrge Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution: Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge,* London, 1987, chapters 3, 5 and 6.
15. Jeno Sziics, 'Three Historical Regions of Europe', in Keane, *Civil Society and the State,* p. 294.
16. Sziics, p. 295.
17. Sziics, p. 2%.
18. Sziics, p. 302.
19. Sziics, p. 304.
20. Sziics, p. 306.
21. I have discussed the specificity of Greece in *Peasant-Citizen and Slave,* London 1988, where the relation between this unique formation and the growth of chattel slavery is also explored.
22. I develop this point at greater length in 'Capitalism and Human Emancipation', *New Left Review* 167, January/February 1988, especially pp. 8–14.
23. The defence of formal democracy is sometimes explicitly accompanied by an attack on 'substantive' democracy. Agnes Heller, in 'On Formal Democracy', writes: 'The statement of Aristotle, a highly realistic analyst, that all democracies are immediately transformed into anarchy, the latter into tyranny, was a statement of fact. not an aristocratic slandering by an anti-democrat. The Roman reoublic was not for a moment democratic. And I should like to add to all that that kven if the degradation of modem democracies into tyrannies is far from being excluded (we were witness to it in the cases of German and Italian Fascism), the endurance of modem democracies is due precisely to their formal character.' (p. 130) Let us take each sentence in turn. The denunciation of ancient democracy as the inevitable forerunner of anarchy and tyranny (which is, incidentally, more typical of Plato or Polybius than Aristotle) is, precisely, an anti-democratic slander. For one thing, it bears no relation to real historical sequences, causal or even chronological. Athenian democracy brought an end to the institution of tyranny, and went on to survive nearly two centuries, only to be defeated not by anarchy but by a superior military power. During those centuries, of course, Athens produced an astonishingly fruitful and influential culture which survived its defeat and also laid the foundation for Western conceptions of citizenship and the rule of law. The Roman republic was indeed 'not for a moment democratic', and the most notable result of its aristocratic regime was the demise of the republic and its replacement by autocratic imperial rule. (That undemocratic Republic was, incidentally, a major inspiration for what Heller calls a 'constitutive' document of modern democracy, the US Constitution.) To say that the 'degradation of modem democracies into tyrannies is far from being excluded' seems a bit coy in conjunction with a (parenthetical) reference to Fascism – not to mention the history of war and imperialism which has been inextricably associated with the regime of 'formal democracy'. As for endurance, it is surely worth mentioning that there does not yet exist a 'formal democracy' whose life-span equals, let alone exceeds, the duration of the Athenian democracy. No European 'democracy', by Heller's criteria, is even a century old (in Britain, for example, plural voting survived until 1948); and the American republic, which she credits with the 'constitutive idea' of formal democracy, took a long time to improve on the Athenian exclusion of women and slaves, while free working men – full citizens

in the Athenian democracy – cannot be said to have gained full admission even to 'formal' citizenship until the last state property qualifications were removed in the nineteenth century (not to mention the variety of stratagems to discourage voting by the poor in general and blacks in particular, which have not been exhausted to this day). Thus, at best (and for white men only), an endurance record of perhaps one century and a half for modern 'formal democracies'.

24. This paragraph is drawn largely from my article on civil society in ***New Statesman and Society,*** 6 October, 1989.
25. This is, for example, the view of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in ***Hegemony and Socialist Strategy,*** London 1985.
26. See, for example, Stuart Hall in ***Marxism Today,*** October 1988.
27. The notion of complex equality is primarily the work of Michael Walzer, ***Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality,*** London 1983. See also Keane, ***Democracy and Civil Society,*** p. 12.
28. These points are developed in my 'Capitalism and Human Emancipation', ***New Left Review*** 167, January/February 1988.
29. For a discussion of both the advantages and disadvantages in Walzer's conception of complex equality, see Michael Rustin, ***For a Pluralist Socialism,*** London 1985, pp. 76–95.
30. Such an analysis of capitalism, for example, constitutes the core of ***Marxism Today's*** conception of 'New Times', which purports to provide a platform for a modern Communist Party in Britain. See the special issue, ***New Times,*** October 1988, and A ***Manifesto for New Times,*** June 1989.
31. The argument that we have reached a kind of Hegelian end of history, with the triumph of liberal democracy over all other ideologies, is the latest conceit of the American right, as elaborated by Francis Fukuyama in ***National Interest,*** Summer 1989.