

# PERSPECTIVES ON CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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## Preamble: A Parable of Perspectives

Imagine a town where wealthy residents live in strong, well-built homes in the center of town, and poorer residents live in rather shabby shacks around the edge of the town. Every few nights, without warning, some sort of monster or group of terrorists from the surrounding countryside carries off one of the residents from the homes around the edge of town. The hapless resident is never heard from again.

Town residents are divided over what to do about this situation. One group interprets the situation as a punishment from the gods. The society has deviated from its religious traditions, they say, and it is being punished. Or, perhaps individuals are being punished for their own personal wrongdoing. Or it may be that the disappearance of certain residents is part of some master plan of the gods. Since the disappearances have occurred for as long as anyone can remember, there definitely must be a reason for them, this group argues, though we as mere mortals cannot know for sure that reason. All that can be done, they say, is for the town to increase its sacrifices to the gods and for individuals to pray either that they might escape this tragedy or for the courage to endure whatever suffering may befall them.

Another set of town residents argues that it is each individual's responsibility to protect themselves; there is nothing the town as a whole can or should do. People with ingenuity and initiative will figure out a way to take care of themselves. Those who do not figure out and implement a survival strategy are, in effect, choosing to submit themselves to the vagaries of the monster or the terrorists. Thus, while certain individuals

may feel saddened by the loss of specific residents who remain vulnerable, no resident owes anything to any other resident; everyone must take care of themselves.

Still another set of residents disagrees, saying that it is too easy for the well-to-do residents of the center of the town who are not in danger to say that everyone should take care of themselves. In fact, this third group argues, the wealthy who are not themselves in danger have a responsibility to try and help those less-well-off residents who, because they happen to live on the edge of town, are more vulnerable to the monster or the terrorists. Thus this group proposes that some of the poorer residents be brought into the homes of the wealthy each night, where they will apparently be safe. Since there is not room enough to bring all of the poorer residents in each night, five will be selected randomly each night. This ensures that each vulnerable resident has an equal opportunity to be protected. It is not a perfect solution, they recognize, but it seems to be the only practical, humane, and fair one available.

A fourth set of residents disagrees with all of the others. We should not simply endure whatever monster or gang of terrorists that is endangering us, they say, we should go to the root of the problem and attempt to eliminate the threat. Yes, it might be dangerous, they concede, and the unknown qualities of the monster or the terrorists create a great deal of anxiety. But denying the problem, they say, will not solve it. Nor will protecting a few residents, no matter how fairly it is done, eliminate the threat. The only way to do that, this group says, is to take on the monster or the terrorists directly. But where will the resources for this task come from, people

ask. Let the wealthy provide them, responds this group. Their wealth allows them to unfairly escape the problem which equally deserving, but poorer, citizens cannot. This injustice must be remedied so that, in addition to eliminating the current threat, the town can be restructured in such a way that no resident will have to be vulnerable to any future monsters or terrorists.

## **The Nature of Perspectives**

The parable discussed above illustrates the existence of differing perspectives on a given social problem. Starting from a different set of assumptions, each group arrived at a different proposed solution. But why? Why do humans make assumptions about the world? And why do different groups make different assumptions?

Humans must make assumptions about the world because, as a species, we lack instinctual determinism. Unlike other animals, very little of our behavior is a direct result of a biologically produced program of understanding and action. We must use our extensive cognitive capacities to interpret our experience. This is both a blessing and a curse in a sense because, on the one hand, we can creatively and flexibly understand our experience, reflect upon it, and change our society and our pattern of social change. On the other hand, we must interpret our experience — no ready-made, genetically produced answers are available.

Thus interpretation of experience is a normal process that occurs constantly in daily life, for everyone, with regard to every issue. All humans, whether they realize it or not, have a general overall view, or perspective, on how social life is, and should be, organized. Here is my definition of a perspective:

**A perspective is a relatively coherent and consistent system of beliefs that both**

**reflects and simplifies the social world.** A perspective is a system of beliefs. Beliefs are ideas that are not open to empirical proof; rather we choose to accept them on faith. This is why no amount of logical argumentation or presentation of objective facts will, by itself, change someone's perspective. People choose to believe what they will about human nature and society. What is most important is that they understand why they believe in a certain perspective, and what the implications of those beliefs are.

To say that perspectives are relatively coherent means that, given a chance to think about it, most people can articulate, more or less, what they really believe. Perspectives are only relatively consistent because human thoughts and actions are to some extent idiosyncratic — i.e., we are not totally predictable. This is due to the lack of instinctual determinism in humans, coupled with individual free will. Because, as noted earlier, our thoughts and actions are not primarily or extensively determined by biological impulses, we have a great deal of flexibility in our ideas and behavioral choices.

The flexibility of thought and behavior we have as humans generates the need for a perspective. The world is a tremendously complex place; in order not to be overwhelmed we need some systematic way of orienting ourselves within it. A perspective serves this purpose. It is essentially a grid that we lay over our experience of social reality in order to make that experience meaningful to us. And in order to provide meaning, the ideas comprising the perspective must have some degree of coherence and consistency. A somewhat coherent and consistent perspective is thus necessary for every human individual.

Although each of us tends to think of our

perspective as uniquely ours and ours alone — i.e., as a product of our own unique experience and insights, in fact perspectives are fundamentally social in origin and nature. We acquire, maintain, and modify meanings and interpretations of life events not as an isolated individual, but as a member of specific social groups. And it is the values, norms, and belief systems of those groups that shape how we interpret the world. That is, by being a member of a social group we come to see and interpret the world the way in which that group sees and interprets the world.

Perhaps we can better understand this point by looking at the acquisition and use of language. Each individual speaks, not a language of their own invention, but one that is passed on to them by the social group into which they were born. The individual learns, not all possible sounds, words, and meanings, but only those that reflect the cultural experience of their society and their primary groups. These words and meanings in turn shape the individual's approach to comprehending and dealing with both the physical and social environment.

So too with a perspective. This is not, however, an inflexible and wholly deterministic process. Just as an individual can become fluent in another language, so too can they modify or replace their perspective. In fact, we inevitably do just this when we join new social groups or when our social experience compels new insights into the nature of human nature and society. Thus we can say that the two most important characteristics of perspectives are that they are both necessary and social.

In addition, perspectives have three basic components: (1) description, (2) analysis and evaluation, and (3) prescription. Ordinarily these components are only implicit within a generalized, often amorphous and loosely organized set of

ideas held by each individual. If challenged, however, we can almost always make these ideas explicit. Description is the most accessible component of a perspective. It is simply the way we view the present state of social affairs — i.e., when we look out at the social world, what do we see? Closely tied to this is our analysis and evaluation of that state of affairs — why is the social world like this, and is this (by our own personal standards) good or bad?

This judgment is rendered on the basis of, first of all, a view of human nature. Do we think humans are inherently selfish, aggressive, altruistic, greedy, lazy, or cooperative? Obviously our answer to this question will go a long way toward explaining why we think society is in the state it is. Second, our analysis and evaluation is influenced by our basic values — ideas that serve as criteria for judging what types of behavior and attitudes are appropriate, moral, or desirable. In addition, each of us has in mind a picture of a normative social order — i.e., a picture of how we think society should be organized. Comparison of this ideal type of society with the actually existing state of affairs provides us with both an evaluation of what's wrong and what's right with the social order, and an analysis of why this is so.

The final component of a perspective is a prescription for social change, or a set of ideas about how the social order must be changed to bring it into conformity with our normative view. This prescription is necessarily based on our orientation to social change — i.e., our notion of how social change comes about and how much social change is both necessary and possible under current circumstances.

## **General Meaning of the Perspectives**

In classifying and discussing what I consider to be the four basic perspectives on

the social order, I will make use of the terms conservative, liberal, and radical. Some social scientists and popular writers have suggested that, through overuse, misuse, employment of shifting or abstract, unclear definitions, and/or their use as political epithets by those holding opposing views, these terms are no longer meaningful or valid for a systematic analysis of social life. I disagree. The general root meaning of these terms is clear, I believe, and continues to accurately describe fundamentally different broad orientations to society and social change. What has changed is the specific, detailed content of each perspective. We would expect this to happen because society itself has changed. These historical changes in various details do not, however, in my judgment alter the basic underlying thrust of each perspective.

To be conservative in any society is to desire to conserve the past in order to protect and perpetuate tradition. The root meaning of liberal, on the other hand, is liberty, implying personal freedom and opportunity. Liberals, then, tend to be oriented to modifying the present in order to allow for progress in the area of individual civil rights and liberties. The root meaning of radical is root, and radicals wish to go to the roots of things in that they strive to change the existing society in fundamental ways (i.e., at the roots) in order to better meet the needs of the future. Thus the name of each perspective connotes a fundamentally important aspect of its orientation.

### **Historical Origins of the Perspectives**

Each of the four perspectives that I will discuss here is rooted in a particular set of historical socioeconomic circumstances. That is, each perspective arose at a specific point in time and essentially codified basic assumptions about society, human nature, and social change held by certain social groups at that time. No perspective exists in

a vacuum, however, and each perspective develops, to a certain extent, in conflict with other views. Proponents of new perspectives argue that they have arrived at views that are more accurate, appropriate, efficacious, and/or moral than other perspectives. Advocates of existing views obviously disagree.

The chart at the end of this article illustrates the historical relationships among the perspectives discussed here. The Organic Conservative perspective was the dominant ideology of feudal society. It emphasized the timeless, unchanging nature of a society conceived of as an organic whole, where people were given their station in life by tradition or fate.

Beginning around the 16th century, however, society in Western Europe began to change rapidly. Along with these changes, a new ideology grew up to both explain and advocate for them. This new perspective, known as Liberalism, emphasized individualism and the necessity for each individual to be the master of their own fate. The focus on individual liberty and private property meshed well with the developing economic system of free market capitalism.

Following a period of political and social revolution, capitalism triumphed in Western Europe. Classical Liberalism (as we call it today) was its dominant ideology. Capitalism is an extremely dynamic socioeconomic system, however, and it continued to change. In the late 18th and 19th centuries capitalist societies underwent a further revolution that was technological, economic, and social in nature. This period of dramatic change is known as the Industrial Revolution.

A relatively small number of entrepreneurs became fabulously wealthy as a result of the Industrial Revolution, but millions of people were plunged into almost

unimaginable misery. Farmers and peasants were forced off of their lands and crowded into tenement slums in the cities. Skilled craftspeople of all kinds were turned into mere appendages of machines. Small entrepreneurs were driven out of business when they were unable to compete with the large industrial concerns. Working conditions routinely included 18-hour days under unsafe conditions for very low wages. Child labor — beginning as young as 6 or 7 years old — was common. Factory towns everywhere became centers of poverty, disease, and misery. All of this was worsened by the seeming irrationality of the capitalist business cycle of boom periods followed by precipitous economic depressions.

Obviously, under these conditions, many people began to lose confidence in capitalism as an appropriate form of socioeconomic organization. One important new ideology that arose to challenge capitalism was socialism. Socialists argued that capitalism was really about profits for the few and poverty for the masses. As an economic system it was fundamentally irrational, they said, and could never meet the needs of all citizens. Moreover, they argued, capitalism set up a kind of dog-eat-dog competition in which each individual was encouraged to see everyone else as a competitor — or even enemy — in the struggle to gain a share of limited resources.

For all of these reasons, these radicals argued, capitalism needed to be completely replaced. Socialists proposed to supplant capitalism with socialism, a system that would recognize the fundamentally social nature of human nature and overcome the alienating individualism of capitalism. Rational planning would replace the vagaries of the market and insure that basic needs were met for all.

The socialist ideology attracted a wide

following, not only among the poor underclass, but among intellectuals and middle-class people as well. Under this pressure, the supporters of capitalism — the Classical Liberals — developed a split in their ranks. One group conceded that changes in capitalist ideology and practice were necessary in order to save the system.

Specifically, these Liberals supported government intervention to provide some rudimentary economic planning, to insure fair competition, and to create a safety net for those unable to compete in the marketplace. Because they continued to endorse capitalism as the system most consonant with individual liberty, but at the same time promoted significant modifications, or reforms, in it, this group became known as Reform Liberals.

Another segment of the Classical Liberals, however, would have no talk of reform. Tampering with free-market capitalism, they said, would only make things worse. Capitalism has its own self-correcting mechanisms (the “invisible hand” of the market, according to Adam Smith) and, if left to itself, will adjust. Reforms, no matter how well intentioned, will only make things worse in the long run and, more significantly, reduce individual liberty. The best policy for government was the traditional “hands off” or *laissez faire* approach. In other words, this group continued to be advocates for Classical Liberalism. However, because times had changed, and because they were arguing to conserve a pre-existing way of doing things, this perspective would now more appropriately be called conservative. But to distinguish it from Organic Conservatism, we call it Individualist Conservatism, due to its fundamental belief in, and celebration of, the individual. Thus we arrive today at four major ideological perspectives: Organic Conservative, Individualist Conservative, Reform Liberal, and Socialist/ Radical.

## The Organic Conservative Perspective

The Organic Conservative perspective is rooted in the traditional relations of feudal society. Its ideological roots may be found in the Christian paternalism of Thomas Aquinas, in the defense of monarchy put forth by classical conservatives like Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre in the wake of the French Revolution, and in the view of human nature expressed by early social contract theorist Thomas Hobbes.

Organic Conservatives contend that humans have a dual nature: we are, they say, simultaneously biological creatures driven by base animal instincts and spiritual beings with a higher, nobler moral sense. Our biological drives are inherently selfish and irrational. They well up inside us and drive us to seek immediate satisfaction, regardless of the cost to ourselves or others. So powerful are these biological drives that individuals by themselves cannot control them. This is why, say Organic Conservatives, humans are imperfect and naturally prone to anarchy, evil, and mutual destruction (what British philosopher Thomas Hobbes called “the war of all against all”).

Standing against this aggressive, competitive, and selfish side of human nature is our morality, as embodied in the norms and values of social institutions, especially the family. It is this social order, according to Organic Conservatives, that provides the rules and structure to keep us on the straight and narrow. As individuals, we need society to protect us from ourselves (i.e., our base instincts), as well as from each other. Society, then, is so important that it almost takes on a life of its own — the whole (society) is clearly greater than the sum of its parts (individuals).

It is this view of society that gives the

Organic Conservative perspective its name. Society, in their view, is like a living, breathing organism (like, for example, the human body). That is, society is a functionally differentiated unified structure in which the whole — a living organism — is clearly greater than the sum of its parts. Furthermore, in this scheme, each individual part has its own specific role to play, but is subordinate to the welfare of the whole. Thus, according to Organic Conservatives, the social order takes primacy over the rights of its individual members. Individual freedom exists only in the context of social order; individuals are free to act only within the bounds set by society.

Inequality and hierarchy in society are as natural and necessary, say Organic Conservatives, as they are in a functionally differentiated biological organism. Enlightened elites in society must govern and take responsibility for the ignorant and the weak. Their rule should not be tyranny, but rather enlightened paternalism or *noblesse oblige*. Society should model the authority relations in the traditional patriarchal family, where “father knows best.” Organic Conservatives explain and justify society’s social hierarchy in terms of the will of God, the laws of nature, or the inherent and ineradicable differences among individuals and social groups.

The central values of the Organic Conservative perspective are authority, order, and tradition. Authority, which can be defined as legitimate coercion, is crucial to the stability of society. Order refers to the institutionalized hierarchy of statuses and roles within the society. The reliance of Organic Conservatives on tradition reflects the profoundly conservative nature of this perspective. Customs established by tradition are preferred because they have proven themselves successful and are stable. Any deviation from past customs threatens instability.

For Organic Conservatives, the normal state of affairs in a hierarchical society based on tradition is a stable equilibrium. Change is ordinarily minimal. When social change does occur, it is episodic, as elites struggle to incorporate the change in such a way that threats to the traditional order are minimized and a new equilibrium is created as quickly as possible. Organic Conservatives are deeply suspicious of, and even hostile to, social change. This is because any social change is likely to be disruptive to the social order, and any disruption of the social order threatens to loosen individuals from the social bonds that keep their biological drives in check. Since humans are imperfect, a perfect society can never be created. It is, in the view of Organic Conservatives, futile — and even dangerous — to try. The ideal system for the Organic Conservative is paternalistic capitalism, resting on stability through elite-managed growth.

### **The Individualist Conservative Perspective**

As we saw earlier, the Individualist Conservative perspective is identical to Classical Liberalism, which was the dominant perspective of capitalism during the 18th and 19th centuries. Although the roots of this perspective go back at least as far as the 16th century, Classical Liberalism became dominant with the rise of industrial capitalism, especially in Great Britain, which was at the heart of this revolution.

At first glance, the Individualist Conservative perspective seems to possess a view of human nature that is similar to that of Organic Conservatives, in that humans are seen by this perspective as inherently selfish. There is an important difference, however, and it makes a big difference. Whereas Organic Conservatives view humans as driven by irrational biological urges, for Individualist Conservatives humans are coldly, calculatingly rational. This means,

they say, that every human behavior can be explained as a rational, selfish act designed to “look out for #1” — i.e., ourselves.

According to this view — called utilitarianism by British philosopher Jeremy Bentham — each individual operates on the basis of a rational calculus of pain and pleasure. That is, all of our behavior is based on a cost/benefit analysis of what’s in it for us. (This view has become the basis for much of modern neoclassical economics in the form of marginal utility theory.) In the absence of any strong incentive to experience pleasure or avoid pain, humans are not driven by anything and are fundamentally inert or lazy.

It is important to point out that Individualist Conservatives believe that humans are highly individualistic: each individual’s rationally selfish calculus is unique to that individual. In this case, what form of society makes most sense? Obviously, one in which the individual experiences the least restraint and fewest barriers to maximizing their individual selfish calculus. Individualist Conservatives believe that this can best be achieved through the institutions of private property and the free market.

The right to own and control private property — especially productive property — assures individuals that they will reap the rewards of their own labor and maximize control over their own personal security and destiny. The free market is the competitive arena in which individuals meet to freely exchange goods and services, each according to their own selfish calculus. Out of this free exchange, a de facto social order is created. This is the idea behind Adam Smith’s famous notion of the self-regulation of markets through the “invisible hand” of the law of supply and demand.

For Individualist Conservatives, the

individual is the prime and only reality. Society is thus no more than the sum total of the individuals who make it up; the term is only a convenient fiction for speaking about what is actually just a grouping of individuals. Social order is achieved, according to Individualist Conservatives, through a social contract arrived at by free and independent individuals. According to 18th-century social contract theorists like Montesquieu and Rousseau, individuals agree to a common restriction of their personal rights in order to achieve a context in which to realize their own rational selfish ends.

For Individualist Conservatives, government is the main coercive force in society, because it makes and enforces restrictions on individual decisions and behavior. However, most Individualist Conservatives are not anarchists (i.e., those who desire a society with no central governing body whatsoever). Individualist Conservatives grudgingly accept a limited role for centralized government whose authority is restricted to four basic areas: (1) maintaining a system of national defense; (2) dealing with internal threats to the social order through the criminal justice system; (3) acting as a referee for contractual disputes through the civil court system; and (4) providing needed or desired services which are not profitable for the private sector like parks and schools, or which the private sector cannot accomplish on its own, like airline and securities regulation. Other than this, Individualist Conservatives argue that government should stay out of people's lives and leave them to the pursuit of their own selfish rational ends. In the economic sphere, this policy is known as *laissez faire*, from the French for "leave it alone."

For Individualist Conservatives, inequality and hierarchy are natural outcomes of the market process. Individuals who have achieved success in the economic

marketplace may be expected to use their resources in pursuit of their personal goals in other institutional areas (e.g., politics, culture) as well. Any collective attempt to redistribute wealth is likely to be disastrous, Individualist Conservatives would argue, not least because it goes against human nature and the principles of a rational social order.

From all of this, it is clear that the central values of Individualist Conservatives are individual liberty and private property. Freedom is understood as freedom from restraint on the individual. Change, from the Individualist Conservative perspective, occurs in a naturally slow and incremental way, as a result of the accretion of individual actions. Social change is cyclical, like the cycles of the market. The ideal system of the Individualist Conservative is *laissez faire* capitalism.

### **The Reform Liberal Perspective**

The Reform Liberal perspective developed in response to the recurring social and economic crises of capitalism in the 19th and 20th centuries. Favoring an interventionist approach to dealing with these crises, Reform Liberals split with Classical Liberals, who maintained their faith in *laissez faire* capitalism and are known today as Individualist Conservatives. Not surprisingly, however, given their common origins, the two perspectives today still share a number of important assumptions.

First and foremost among these is the assumption that humans are basically rational, selfish, and lazy. Where Reform Liberals depart from Individualist Conservatives, however, is in their belief that sometimes, under some circumstances, humans can be altruistic. Altruism refers to putting someone else's needs ahead of one's own, or concern for others at one's own personal expense. For Individualist

Conservatives, altruism is nonexistent. Even acts that, on the face of it, seem self-sacrificing are really meant to satisfy some selfish individual end, they argue. Reform Liberals, however, believe that all humans, while basically selfish and individualistic, have at least some shred of altruism in them that can be tapped through an appeal to their “better nature” rather than to their “base instincts.”

It is this belief in the existence of altruism that gives the Reform Liberal perspective its progressive, melioristic slant. With roots in Classical Liberalism, Reform Liberals are vitally interested in preserving individual rights and freedoms. This can best be done, they argue, by tapping the altruism of the citizenry to create certain reforms. What reforms do Reform Liberals want? Basically, those that will enhance individual freedom and opportunity by creating fairness and stability. Reform Liberals, like both of the conservative perspectives, believe that inequality is a natural part of the human condition. Where Reform Liberals depart from the conservatives, however, is in the notion that inequality of outcomes can be made to be fair and just.

The Reform Liberal vision of a good society is that of a pure meritocracy. In a meritocracy, rewards are distributed on the basis of merit, which consists of both talent and effort. Thus in a meritocracy people “get what they deserve,” based on a combination of their inborn talent and how hard they work at improving and applying it. Moreover, society benefits as a whole because human talent is used efficiently. There will, of course, be inequality in a meritocracy, but it will be fair, because people will deserve what they get. The focus of Reform Liberals, then, is not so much on outcomes as on the structure of opportunity. What adherents of this perspective want is the “equal opportunity to be unequal.”

Equal opportunity thus protects the rights of individuals to control their own destinies. But how shall equal opportunity be achieved? Since individuals are basically selfish, no individual can be trusted with the power to regulate society. Only a collective mechanism can balance and cancel out various selfish individual interests, and that collective mechanism is government. Government achieves equal opportunity in society through a variety of programs and actions, such as affirmative action programs, creation of the safety net for those who are unable to compete, regulation of trade in the interest of fair competition and the protection of unwitting consumers, and the promotion of economic stability and steady growth. Though government must on the face of it coerce people to follow laws and regulations and to pay taxes to support these activities, citizens ultimately cooperate, Reform Liberals believe, because of their deep-down altruism, through which they really want the competition to be fair.

In keeping with its roots in Classical Liberalism, the central values of the Reform Liberal perspective focus on the individual. These values are the protection and promotion of individual civil rights and the creation and maintenance of equal opportunity for all citizens.

Reform Liberals are generally optimistic about social change. They believe in progress, and subscribe to an evolutionary model of change. Through appropriate interventions, humans can rationalize the social order and constantly improve it. The ideal system for the Reform Liberal is welfare state capitalism.

### **The Socialist/Radical Perspective**

The Socialist perspective initially arose in response to the spread of market capitalism which created new forms of

inequality and disrupted traditional community bonds. The economic and social crisis of industrial capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries accelerated people's search for an alternative to capitalism. Socialists provided both a profound critique of the existing capitalist social order and a vision of an alternative society organized on radically different principles. This reflects the dual nature of a radical perspective. To be truly radical — that is, to go to the roots — a perspective must first of all argue that something is fundamentally and irretrievably wrong with the existing social order. Second, radicals must offer a vision of a workable society that operates on fundamentally different principles, such that it overcomes the deep-rooted problems of the existing order. Socialist/Radicals then, have sort of a double burden, and their perspective must necessarily be more complex and lengthy to present.

Perhaps the most radical part of the Socialist perspective is its view of human nature. Unlike the other three perspectives, Socialists see human nature as *flexible*, not fixed. That is, humans dynamically constitute their own human nature — not separately as individuals, but collectively according to the structural patterns of the institutions of the societies in which they live. This is, moreover, a two-way process. Not only is human nature shaped by existing institutions, but collective attempts by groups of people to remake themselves in turn alter the shape and functioning of institutions. This is indeed a radical insight. A society beset with problems can be fundamentally changed, according to Socialist/Radicals, and a new and more liberating society can be created — but only by appropriate collective action.

Inherent in this view is the assumption that humans are fundamentally social (the perspective is, therefore, *socialist*). Socialist/Radicals believe that, however we

constitute our human nature, we do it collectively. Individuals do not and cannot exist in isolation; whether through relations of antagonism or cooperation, humans are bound to one another in order to meet their most basic needs. Individuals in this view are not automatons or mere products of society. They have free will, but that free will can only be meaningfully exercised in the context of relations to others. Society for Socialist/Radicals is clearly more than the sum of the individuals that make it up. Rather than an organism in stable equilibrium, however, Socialists see society as a set of dynamic social relations that are capable of qualitative as well as quantitative change.

Karl Marx, one of the most systematic proponents of the Socialist perspective, argued that humans primarily seek to create themselves through their productive activity. Because of this, he suggested, the most important feature of any society will be its mode of production, or way of working. This is the means by which individuals, working with and against one another, produce the goods and services necessary to meet their basic needs. These basic needs are not absolute, but are defined by each society according to collectively established standards in each historical period. All the labor required to produce the socially-defined bundle of necessary goods and services is defined as *necessary labor*; any labor over and above this is *surplus labor*.

In general, Socialists suggest, there are two basic ways in which the mode of production can be organized: either the people who do the actual producing control the process and its outcome, or they don't. The "rules of the game" that determine which of these two outcomes will occur are called by Socialists the social relations of production. The social relations of production are the rules of authority governing what is produced, how it is

produced, who does the producing, and who controls the final product. Authority is gained by owning and/or controlling the *means of production*, or raw materials and tools used in the production process. When the producers own or control the means of production, Socialists would say that a classless society exists. When those who do the actual work do not control the process, Socialists say that a class society exists. In a class society, the two most important classes are the *ruling class* and the *producing class*.

In a class society, a fundamentally antagonistic relationship exists between the ruling and the producing class because the ruling class must essentially coerce surplus labor out of the producing class. That the producing class will not freely produce surplus, say Socialist/Radicals, can be seen from the fact that in classless societies (like hunting and gathering tribes, for instance), the people perform no or very little surplus labor. The producers decide what is socially necessary, and they stop producing when they have achieved it. In a class society, on the other hand, producers must continue working to satisfy the demands of the ruling class. This is not primarily a matter of greed on the part of the ruling class, say Socialists, but rather a function of the institutional arrangements of society. For in fact the ability of the ruling class to rule depends upon their capacity to coerce surplus from the producers. Not only does the ruling class live off of the social surplus, but the conditions of its appropriation help to perpetuate its rule.

Like feudalism, despotism, and slavery, capitalism is, according to Socialist/Radicals, a class society. Like other class societies, capitalism is predicated upon the expropriation of surplus labor from the producers by the ruling class. What is different about capitalism is the hidden way in which this exploitation takes place. On the face of it, after all, capitalist

society provides for more individual choice than any other mode of production — a fact celebrated in Classical Liberal ideology and acknowledged by Socialist/Radicals. But this does not change the fact, say Socialists, that the basis of capitalism remains the exploitation of the producing (or working) class by the ruling (or capitalist) class.

How does this exploitation take place? In capitalism, most social and economic interdependencies are mediated by the market. Unlike previous modes of production where most of what producers fashioned was for direct use by themselves and their kin group, in capitalism nearly everything produced is a *commodity* — that is something produced with express purpose of selling it in the market. When producers go to work in capitalism, they make things for anonymous future purchasers. The market dominates all. Certainly markets and trade existed in previous modes of production, but commodity production was economically and socially peripheral in the wider societal scheme of things. Capitalism is the first mode of production in history in which commodity production is generalized — the vast majority of everything produced is funneled through the market.

When the market is this extensive, it means that members of society are expected to meet the vast majority of their personal human needs through the purchase and consumption of commodities. In the marketplace, one must have enough to sell in order to acquire the money needed to purchase those commodities necessary to meet one's needs. Those who own no material wealth face a dilemma: How are they to survive if they can't buy anything because they have nothing to sell? This is not an isolated dilemma because, over time, Socialists note, capitalism tends to disenfranchise the vast majority of people from their ownership of productive property. At the time of the American

Revolution, for instance, our best historical estimates suggest that approximately 80 percent of the non-slave, non-native population (i.e., Europeans) were self-employed independent producers. That is, the vast majority of citizens in the nascent United States owned productive property. Today, this figure is less than 10 percent. So, say Socialist/Radicals, the Classical Liberal value of private property rings hollow today.

Karl Marx suggested that those who own no productive property in capitalism have only one thing to sell: themselves. More specifically, what they have to sell is their labor-power, or their ability to work. Members of the working class sell this ability to work to an owner of capital in return for a wage. What workers are selling to the capitalist is control — within certain socially-defined legal and ethical limits — of their time and creative abilities. In fact, say Socialists, this amounts to selling oneself into a kind of slavery — wage slavery. The mere fact that this relationship appears to be voluntarily entered into by both parties does not change the fact that it is fundamentally coercive.

In capitalism, coercion of the working class by the capitalist class has two dimensions: exploitation within the working day, and class coercion within society. In the course of the working day, capitalists are obliged by the logic of capitalism (profit) to compel their workers to engage in surplus labor. The ideological barrier to observing this, say Socialists, is that the exploitation is hidden within the workday. Say, for instance, that the average worker with an average productivity requires four hours of labor to produce their share of the goods and services necessary to maintain the producers, as well as to replace the value of raw materials used up in the production process, production overhead, and

depreciation on the machinery. So this worker has produced enough to pay for all expenses. Yet that worker is contracted for, say, an eight hour day. What is that worker doing for the next four hours? The answer: engaging in surplus labor, or being exploited, say Socialists.

Since profits come only from the production of surplus, each capitalist must compel their workers to produce surplus or cease being a capitalist and become a worker themselves. Advocates of pro-capitalist perspectives object that the worker is not actually enslaved and is free to quit an exploitative employer at any time. But, Socialists reply, that worker is not really free to remain outside of market relations. If the worker owns no capital, then they will have to sell their labor-power to some capitalist somewhere or starve. This is the “whip of hunger,” as Marx called it, which compels workers to sell themselves into the exploitation of wage slavery. In capitalism, say Socialists, workers are really only free to choose who will exploit them.

There is another element of coercion at work in the labor market. The transaction between the potential buyer of labor, the employer, and the seller of labor-power, the worker, is not an equal one. Rather, it is weighted in favor of the employer. First of all, most workers own little property, and therefore are reliant on a paycheck to survive. They are, therefore, more or less desperate to sell their labor-power to an employer. The desperation of workers is increased by competition in the labor market, especially as a result of a large pool of “surplus” workers who are unemployed or marginally employed. The vulnerability and relative powerlessness of workers is increased by the global expansion of capitalism. Workers must now compete with other workers around the globe. This expanded relative surplus population serves

as a break on the wage and working-condition demands of employed workers. As long as employed workers know that they can be easily replaced – at home or abroad – they are vulnerable to coercion. Capitalism thus requires unemployment in order to maintain its class relations. This is part of the inherent conflict built into capitalism as a class society.

From the Socialist point of view, another problem built into capitalism is alienation. As Marx described it, alienation refers to a condition wherein humans are separated from their ability to realize their potentials as humans. Alienation takes four forms in capitalism, according to Socialist/Radicals. First, humans are alienated from their productive ability. Because of the coercion within the workday, work becomes, instead of a vehicle in which to realize one's creative potential, a mere means to survive. Instead of living to work, said Marx, workers in capitalism merely work to live. Work becomes a tyranny, a drudgery, something to be endured. Only through hobbies or volunteer work — i.e., outside of the dominant marketplace — do individuals get a glimpse of what really fulfilling work would be like.

Because of the social relations of production or rules of authority of capitalism, workers are not only alienated from their productive activity, but from their final product as well. Above all, what workers produce in capitalism is profits for their employers. In their pure form, these profits are capital. Yet, due to the formal relations of ownership in capitalist society, workers do not recognize capital as their own product. Instead they confront it as an alien, coercive force. Further, the inanimate commodities produced by living human workers come to have a mysterious power over these same humans in a process Marx called commodity fetishism. Passive

consumption of commodities comes to substitute for the active development of human potentials. People come to believe the illusion that happiness, love, community – indeed, any human quality or state – can be purchased through commodities.

Third, people are alienated from each other in capitalism. The Classical Liberal ideology of selfish individualism encourages people to view social relationships as mere instrumental means to some selfish end, instead of ends in themselves. Moreover, workers are alienated from each other as they fiercely compete in the labor market in order to survive. Buyers and sellers are alienated from human relations with one another as market relations triumph over all. Finally, capitalists and workers are alienated from one another by the capitalist requirement of exploitation and inherent class conflict.

Finally, humans are alienated in capitalism from their own nature and needs as humans. Because of the first three types of alienation, humans become separated from their ability to develop their own human potentials. Instead of recognizing the fundamentally social character of human nature, say Socialists, people in capitalism fall into a misplaced individualism. Instead of allowing the individual to really flourish within and because of the group, people are expected to get ahead at the expense of the group. Not only are people encouraged to view each other suspiciously in the marketplace, but, in the ultimate tragedy, they come to be falsely cynical about human nature and the possibilities for social change.

For Socialist/Radicals, social change is a constant and inescapable process, the source of which is conflict and tensions within society. Change is thus produced primarily by internal, not external factors. Moreover, change in the Socialist/Radical

view is dialectical. This means that capitalism, like other class societies, produces, simultaneously with its success, the seeds of its own destruction. In terms Marx borrowed from Hegel, he suggested that every social phenomenon produces its own opposite, or antithesis. Out of the tension between the thing and its opposite, change is produced.

One way the internal tensions in a class society are expressed is as contradictions, or intrinsic problems that cannot be resolved within the framework of the existing system. The central contradiction of capitalism is the progressive socialization of production but continued private appropriation. What this means is that, at the same time that capitalism creates the preconditions for a global society by penetrating all corners of the earth and all social relations in search of profits, control of decisionmaking over ever-larger agglomerations of capital is centralized in fewer and fewer hands. Moreover, as profits are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a relatively tiny global elite, economic, social, environmental, and cultural costs are socialized by getting the working class to pay for them.

Thus, according to Socialist/Radicals, capitalism creates the preconditions for global democracy while becoming increasingly autocratic; it increases tremendously humankind's productive capacity while concentrating the benefits of this capacity in ever-fewer hands; it creates, for the first time in human history, the possibility of economic security for all at the same time that it delivers economic insecurity for most. Specific examples of this irrational but irresolvable (within capitalism) contradiction include the following: paying farmers not to grow food while people starve; building luxury resorts and vacation homes when millions have no home at all; attacks by politicians on poor

welfare recipients when rich "wealthfare" recipients receive many times more "free" money.

In addition to contradictions, Socialist/Radicals see other intrinsic sources of change as well. In any class society, for instance, there will be class conflict. This conflict, and the attempts by the classes to minimize or exacerbate it, is a constant source of change. In capitalism, competition among capitalists, workers, and consumers is also a driving source of innovation and change.

These structural forces, however, do not entirely dictate the course of social change. Instead, they put social change on the agenda and set a context for it. The specific direction and nature of the social change is dictated by human collective action. Thus no particular future is guaranteed to humans. It is not certain that socialism will follow the demise of capitalism. It could just as well be some form of fascism. The particulars will be determined by how people come together to deal with capitalism's irresolvable problems. All that can be guaranteed, from the Socialist/Radical perspective, is that capitalism, like all other social systems, will not last forever. It will eventually collapse under the weight of its own contradictions.

The central values of the Socialist/Radical perspective are equality and solidarity. Equality does not necessarily refer to income equality but rather the condition in which everyone has the opportunity to satisfy their basic human needs. This is summed up in the socialist principle "From each according to their ability, to each according to their need." Equality also means that everyone has equal power over decisions affecting their own lives. Both of these conceptions of equality can only be realized, say Socialist/Radicals, with the dissolution of a class-based

society.

The value of solidarity flows from the Socialist view of human nature, in which humans, as fundamentally social beings, can only actualize their potentials through mutual and reciprocal social action. Freedom is conceived as the ability to develop one's potential in a situation of real, not just formal, freedom. Not surprisingly, Socialists argue that real equality, solidarity, and freedom can only occur in a socialist society.

What, then, do Socialists mean by socialism? Most American Socialists see it as a fundamentally democratic and egalitarian society in which humans, freed for the first time in history from economic insecurity, begin the project of fully realizing their potentials. This most emphatically rules out the model of societies like the former Soviet Union. While the USSR was not a capitalist society, it was still a class society, characterized by a ruling class of political elites and exploitation of workers. Any model of democratic socialism will have to be homegrown, most American socialists would argue. Precursors of socialist relations can be found in religious communalism such as the Shakers, the Oneida community, and New Harmony, in the process of development in post-revolutionary Cuba and Sandinista-led Nicaragua, in the early planning efforts of China and the Soviet Union, and in popular American movements like Populism and the radical wing of the labor and student movements.

For Socialists, democratic socialism can only be fully realized when ownership of the means of production has been fully socialized in a democratic fashion and is in the control of neither a separate class of owners nor a "new class" of elitist technocrats. Socialism involves developing

democratic practices and political participation in all institutional spheres, from the economy and politics to education and the family. As this process unfolds, the basis for overcoming alienation is established. Humans are reunited with their productive activity, develop real connections to their products as commodity fetishism is removed, and begin to construct really communal relations with one another.

The Socialist focus on community and solidarity does not mean that the individual is denied, however. As Marx put it, in socialism, "the free development of each is the precondition to the free development of all." The democratic socialist community is one in which individual differences are not denied, but celebrated. American socialist Herbert Gintis puts it this way. "The healthy community is not one of well-meaning, like-minded individuals, but of individuals who, through expressing their needs, develop not only themselves, but their community and even those whom they oppose." This means that Socialist politics can only be conceived of as a dialectic between the individual and the community, wherein individuals develop their sociality through *negotiating*, but not *compromising*, their differences.

Adherents of the other perspectives charge that this is an overly optimistic view of human possibilities, especially given what they believe to be the inherently selfish nature of human nature. Democratic socialists acknowledge that there is plenty of selfish, competitive, and individualistic behavior to be found in contemporary society. But, they argue, these are not flaws of a fixed human nature, nor are they inevitable. Revolution is a social process, not a single event, Socialists argue. In the process of struggling against the contradictions of capitalism, people will remake themselves as cooperative, solidary beings.

This struggle is already underway, say Socialists, in the efforts of those attempting to create democracy in the workplace and throughout the economy, and in the grassroots organizing of communities to fight economic dislocation, environmental degradation, global exploitation, crime, and poverty. In each case, say Socialists, the actions of these consciously acting human beings have the potential to not only make progressive changes in the existing system, but to make irreversible changes in the people involved and in their vision and expectations for the future. For Socialist/Radicals, then, the process of making democratic socialism is also the process of making socialist — and fully social — individuals.

## **Conclusion**

These, then, are the four basic perspectives on the social order. Many people will not find themselves purely or completely within one perspective or another. In fact, people may be inclined to pick and choose among the various components of several perspectives. The important point to remember, however, is that in many ways these perspectives are based upon fundamentally incompatible assumptions. Once certain assumptions are made about the nature of human nature, specific values and views of society flow from that. So one should choose carefully one's view of human nature.

# HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE 4 BASIC PERSPECTIVES

