

IS GLOBAL JUSTICE IMPOSSIBLE?

by

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I

I will start with a preamble. I sometimes feel that it is indecent to talk about global justice or engage in exercises setting out principles of global justice. Why such a strong emotional, perhaps even irrational, reaction? Because I ambivalently feel — or sometimes feel — that talk about it — setting out normative accounts of global justice — is at worst hypocritical or self-deceptive and at best empty or ideological. I say “ambivalently” because I sometimes also feel, in conflict with the above, that our very humanity — our sense of common human decency — impels us to try to see this matter through to the end: to come to see that there are requirements of global justice and what they are and to fight through to the end to try to make them prevail. Moreover, it seems to me that we cannot rightly limit ourselves to considerations of domestic justice and that this is particularly true if we are reasonably well-off members of the rich capitalist nations of the world. The facts of interdependence and of the depth of the despoliation, exploitation and domination of the peoples of the poor nations of the world (often with the connivance of their elites) by the rich capitalist nations will not allow us so to hedge off our considerations of justice simply to a consideration of domestic justice or justice for our compatriots. Except as a simplifying device — as it is for John Rawls — to get some initial purchase on problems of justice, we cannot in good faith so restrict ourselves.

Yet when we face, or try to face, the question, “What is to be done?”, lapsing into despair and coming to think such talk of global justice is self-indulgent prattle is very seductive. This need not — and I think should not for most of us — be a matter of feeling guilty. Our circumstances may just turn out to be comparatively fortunate, given where and when we were born. This is not something that we could be

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responsible for, any more than we could be responsible for being born impoverished or into a welfare-recipient culture. But, while guilty most of us are not, we can quite rightly be full of anguish and anger over the utter disgustingness of it all. Still, "ought implies can" and things are so horrible that we can come despairingly to feel that nothing can be done, the Cato Institute's bland and confident predictions of a bigger, better, more abundant world to the contrary notwithstanding. We may very well find ourselves going on with business as usual and that can, if we reflect on it, occasion *feelings* of guilt. (We can, of course, feel guilty without being guilty.) But just a little more reflection can lead us to feel that we are being self-indulgent or at least evasive if we so react. If it *really is the case that nothing can be done*, then business as usual is in order. Anything else is just self-flagellation. Indeed it is a hard world. But then it is a hard world and we should stop uselessly and pointlessly wringing our hands and non-evasively come to grips with it, as we come to grips with the facts of our inevitable decline and death, unless we are going to become an Ivan Illich. Do not try to overcome what cannot be overcome. That is both irrational and wrong: irrational obviously and wrong as well, because we should direct our energies to matters where there is a possibility that the ill in question can be overcome or at least ameliorated.

Is global injustice, or at least the terrible extent and depth of global injustice, ineradicable? Or can it, on its grand social scale, be overcome or at least to some extent ameliorated? The world — or rather most of it — is very swinish indeed, as even a minimally attentive reading of any good newspaper will make evident. Perhaps, in some local and fortunate areas of the world, we can do something about it. But can we even minimally de-swinify our world: that is, the whole international order? There is, and understandably, both scepticism and deep cynicism concerning that very prospect. Moving from declamation and lament to argument, I shall, after a brief rehearsing of some facts, articulate and examine what I shall call *the state of the world impossibility argument* and *the political will impossibility argument*. They are both arguments, at least partially distinct, for claiming that a just, or even nearly just, global social order is impossible to achieve. One further preliminary. If we stick to what John Rawls calls *ideal theory* we can articulate a conception of a just global order. Abstracting from everything but the most general empirical considerations and from all questions of instrumentalities about how we could get from where we are now to such a just global

order, we can say what a just world would look like and in terms of that we can easily say things about our unjust social world. Here more or less Left Rawlsians such as Thomas Pogge, D.J.A. Richards, Philippe van Parijs, Brian Barry, Onora O'Neill, Charles Beitz and Henry Shue have, with varying degrees of definiteness, made a case for something more or less like a global *difference* principle. That is the principle that social inequalities are justified only if the practices that sanction them, more than any other feasible arrangements, improve the lot of the worst off strata in the world. I say "more or less Left Rawlsians", for some are more Left and some more Rawlsian than others: Beitz or Richards, say, are more Rawlsian and less Left-leaning than Shue or van Parijs, but they all set out *ideal* conceptions of global justice and they all advocate something like a global difference principle, which in that important way gives their otherwise varied accounts an egalitarian thrust.

It is partly this commitment to ideal theory that gives talk of global justice its empty *look*. However, and that notwithstanding, it seems to me necessary both to do ideal theory *and* to see very clearly its limitations: what it can do; what it cannot do; and, as well, to be aware that it is something that can easily come to have an ideological tilt.<sup>1</sup> What it can do is to give us a sense where in an utterly ideal world we should go. For those of us who are egalitarians, for example, it can spell out for us something of what our egalitarian aspirations and ideals are and at this abstract level yield a more adequate articulation of what we take global justice to be. But we need also to see the limitations of ideal theory and what it cannot do.

In this connection we should note that both Karl Marx and John Dewey, though in different ways, stressed that we should never take ends in isolation from means and that we should be constantly aware of their functional interdependence. If we are at all reasonable, what ends we will advocate — including what principles of global justice — will not be taken independently of considerations concerning both the means by which they can be achieved and questions concerning what the likely effects of acting in accordance with them would be. We need carefully to ask what measures we will need to take for their achievement or approximation. And we will need carefully to consider the human costs of their achievement. When we engage in such inquiries with any

1 Kai Nielsen, "Ideal and Non-Ideal Theory: How Should We Approach Questions of Global Justice?", *The International Journal of Applied Philosophy* II/3 (1985), 33-41.

attentiveness, it is quite possible that some of the ends we advocate will change, given a better knowledge of the range of feasible means for achieving them and the alternative available ends, together with their comparative attractiveness and the means available for realising them. Similarly, ends that seem to us on reflection desirable will effect the means we will seriously entertain. There are, in short, reciprocal interactions all the way along.

As egalitarians (if that is what we are), to place this consideration in terms of our present problem, we believe that the life of everyone matters and matters equally. We believe, that is, that all people have equal moral standing. We may give this a welfarist reading where we argue that everyone should be equal in satisfaction or that everyone should be equally happy. But when it is pointed out to us that, given human differences, that is impossible, short of drastic and systematic genetic engineering and a careful control of people, and probably not even then, we will move, if we are reasonable, to something like claiming that it should be the case that everyone should have equal initial resources or an equal opportunity for well-being or equal access to the conditions of well-being or that the basic needs of everyone should be equally met or, at least, that the conditions for their being so met be in place. Again this claim (more accurately a family of claims) should be scrutinised in terms of its (their) instrumentalities and in relation to other ends as well. We need in serious moral reflection to distinguish between means and ends, but we also need, as Dewey repeatedly stressed, to consider them together in their functional interactions and interdependence.

So how the world goes, political-economic and natural, and how it can be made to go, are crucial matters for us to consider when we are trying to set out the principles of global justice. So, though we should *not* scorn ideal theory — it can show us what we would ideally want in a world free from obstacles — we are back, and very centrally, in thinking about global justice, to our impossibility arguments: (1) natural (in some sense); and (2) political-economic. I do not, however, want to say that these two impossibility arguments can, or should be, *sharply* separated. That our forests and fish are disappearing is not, of course, independent of past and present political-economic policies. Things could have been different if previous policies had been different and it is plain that they could have been different. But that there are fewer cod in 1998 than in 1930 is a fact about cod stocks (something that just is at a particular time a state of affairs there in nature); and that the Spanish

systematically over-fish and are supported by their government is at least a putative political and economic fact (a social fact that depends on what human beings will, on what they do and on what practices are in place). That capitalism encourages the exploitation of the environment is another such social fact, while that global warming occurs is a physical fact: though it is in fact a fact because of certain social facts concerning what people in the past did and are continuing to do. It is not like the eclipse of the moon. It is more like smog over Los Angeles. Nonetheless, I shall discuss separately, for reasons which shall become apparent, impossibility arguments from the physical state of the world *now* — our plundered planet arguments — and impossibility arguments linked with the capitalist political-economic order — what I call political will impossibility arguments.

## II

A little more than a decade ago I wrote a series of related articles on global justice where I argued that the problems about its at least seeming unachievability were not what they were usually presented as, namely as a bleak matter of factual impossibilities, but rather they were essentially a certain kind of political-economic impossibility, namely impossibilities that were impossibilities only given the capitalist order or an order fundamentally like the capitalist order.<sup>2</sup> Neo-Malthusian arguments were, I argued, in effect nihilistic romanticism parading as tough-minded realism. I argued that there are enough resources around, including food, to reasonably sustain the world's population. The then

2 Kai Nielsen, "On the Need to Politicise Political Morality: World Hunger and Moral Obligation", in J.R. Pennock and J.W. Chapman, eds., *Ethics, Economics and The Law (Nomos XXIV)*, 1982, 253-67; Kai Nielsen, "Global Justice and the Imperatives of Capitalism", *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXX/10 (1983), 608-10; Kai Nielsen, "Global Justice, Power and the Logic of Capitalism", *Critica* XVI/48 (1984), 35-50; Kai Nielsen, "Global Justice, Capitalism and the Third World", *Journal of Applied Philosophy* I/2 (1984), 175-86; Kai Nielsen, "Ideal and Non-Ideal Theory", *supra* n.1; Kai Nielsen, "Survival and 'the Ecological Hypothesis'", in Raymond Bradley and Stephen Dugid, eds., *Environmental Ethics*, Vol. 2, (Burnaby, British Columbia: Institute for the Humanities, Simon Fraser University, 1987), 135-75; Kai Nielsen, "World Government, Security and Global Justice", in Steven Luper-Foy, ed., *Problems of International Justice* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1988), 263-82.

10,000 people starving each day — now up to 35,000 — was and still is unnecessary. The problem was access to food that was there or could readily be produced and *not*, as was usually thought, that the resources just were not there, so that we needed to engage in a neo-Malthusian Hardinistic triage faced with our allegedly swamping lifeboat earth.<sup>3</sup> What we needed, instead, was a deep change in our socio-economic order. We needed to move from capitalism to a socialism that could meet people's basic needs in a way that was *politically and economically* impossible under capitalism. (There are now the productive *forces* (*powers*) under capitalism to do it, but capitalist productive *relations* make it impossible. In that way it is economically impossible under *capitalism*. This puts political struggle centre stage.)

However, the problem, I argued, was very real: for the possibilities of achieving socialism were bleak. By now they are — or so at least it seems — even bleaker; and in addition it is widely believed that with socialism we have a system, *pace* Marx and the Marxist tradition, which is not very good at developing the forces of production and at efficiently allocating what has been produced, even when the political will is there and the socialism genuinely democratic. The old problem about the unlikelihood of achieving socialism is there exacerbated by the belief that socialist economies could not achieve the abundance or the distributive efficiency to bring to an end the starvation, malnutrition and the general impoverishment of the world. It is a world in which billions of people live in terrible conditions, where nothing even nearly like decent life conditions or life chances obtain. Rather our world is, with its present population and resources, a horror of starvation, malnutrition, ill health, grossly unsanitary life conditions, utter lack of security and short life expectancy. It is a world where about a quarter of the world's population live in destitution. So we are back, or so it seems, where we started. We are faced here with both political-economic impossibility arguments there in all their force; and with physical (state of the world) impossibility arguments unmet as well. Whatever brought about the physical despoliation of the earth — perhaps it was rampant and

3 Garrett Hardin, "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor", in William Aiken and Hugh Lafollette, eds., *World Hunger and Moral Obligation* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 12-21. But see, for contrast, Onora O'Neill, "Lifeboat Earth", in Charles R. Beitz et al., eds., *International Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 262-68.

unrestrained capitalism — we have by now, the worry goes, reached a point of no return. We are coming to a triage situation in which the earth is rapidly approaching a state where it can no longer sustain us, or at least cannot sustain us in anything like our present numbers and in anything like the present ways in which people in the rich countries live. It might be said that this is true only where the “us” is taken to range over the world’s total population. Perhaps, some will say, the earth can, though with reduced expectations, sustain just a fortunate few, while the rest will continue to live, if they live at all, under conditions of extreme poverty and degradation. Socialism or the worldwide hegemony of Scandinavian-style welfare state capitalism, this neo-Malthusian claim goes, is not, as a matter of cold hard fact, sustainable on a world-wide scale. It is just not on any feasible agenda. The cosmopolitan and egalitarian aspirations of socialism and of social democracy cannot be met. There is no escape from this swinish world of triage. This is just how it will be. Such claims come from many sources and have sometimes been articulated very powerfully. So I need to return to these things.

### III

What first needs to be faced is that the fact of the matter is that things have become worse in the world since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, which was supposed to herald such hope for accountable democracies and for improved economies giving rise to better life conditions. Since I wrote that series of articles, the rich have continued to get richer and the poor, including the staggeringly impoverished poor, poorer. The end of communism and the cold war has not helped that at all. Things just go on getting worse. The gap between the wealthy and powerful capitalist nations — the only wealthy and powerful nations there are — and the poor nations of the world has grown in almost every dimension: certainly in wealth, power, access to education, to information, to health, to food, to shelter, to security and the like. One quarter of the world is starving, according to *Amnesty International’s* recent report. Civil war, increasing genocide, racism, repression of populations, torture, plunder and murder are, as we all know, on the increase. There are human rights disasters all over the place and deteriorating economic conditions for all but a few rich capitalist elites (either capitalists themselves or their major facilitators).

The deterioration is more dramatic among the poor nations of the world. Save the Children has reported that the health care systems in many of the poorest countries are collapsing and that this is exacerbated by the fact that aid from the rich countries has been reduced. This decline in health services (in 1995-96), the worst in 50 years, means that simple, preventable diseases will be killing more children by the end of the century. The *Save the Children* report estimates that it costs 12 dollars per head per year in such countries to provide basic health care. But many countries, even *if* they had the political will, cannot provide that. Or at least their governments say they cannot. The Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) spends just 40 cents per head per year and Liberia and Tanzania spend 70 cents. What this means is that the health care systems, such as they are, in the poorest parts of the world, are just breaking down. One-sixth of the world's population — 800 million people — have no access to health care.<sup>4</sup> I remarked earlier that each day around 35,000 people (most of them children) throughout the world die of hunger-related diseases. This goes on while the Congress of the United States of America awards the Pentagon \$700 million a day for their military budget. This budget is nearly equal, by the way, to the military budgets of all the other nations combined. Significantly, it is 17 times greater than the combined military budgets of the six states the Pentagon regards as the most dangerous threats to its security. It is plain, as plain as anything can be, on almost any conception of justice, even a libertarian one such as Robert Nozick's or a differently conservative one such as P.T. Bauer's, that something has obviously gone very wrong in the distribution of resources. Poor countries with their not infrequently corrupt ruling elites are pressured into buying arms from the wealthy capitalist countries — states with large and aggressive arms industries — while the populations of these poor countries starve. While, as we have seen, the Democratic Republic of Congo spends 40 cents per head per year on health care, we should now add that it spends \$9.70 cents per head per year on its defence budget. While Tanzania spends 70 cents per head per year on health care, it spends \$4 dollars per head per year on defence. Moreover, in some of these poor nations the arms they buy are used to oppress their own people. In some countries work camps, prisons and administrative detention centres exist where hundreds of thousands of people are

4 *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, May 6, 1996, 5.



incarcerated for political reasons, sometimes for as little as speaking their minds. China is a shining example here. Smaller, poorer countries sometimes have similar situations, but not on such a scale. Proportionally, however, they are no better. The comparatively rich and privileged elites in these countries live very well indeed, while the poor — the bulk of the population — live in wretched conditions and are, to sustain the wealth of the elites, exploited and often brutally repressed by them. In all sorts of dimensions, the disparities between the rich and poor countries are staggering, with billions of people living in conditions that are plainly inhuman.

It was my argument in the past, and it is the argument of many others as well, including the very incisive arguments of Onora O'Neill and Thomas Pogge, that this great disparity is unnecessary.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps we cannot get to a global difference principle, but the extent of some of the differentials in the conditions of life is both unnecessary and horribly unjust. Indeed, “unjust” is too weak a word here. It is just plain grossly inhumane, showing a total disregard for the lives of great masses of people. Being (to put it minimally) unnecessary and being what it is (the things we have described above), it is horribly unjust on almost any account of injustice. I have argued, as have O'Neill and Pogge, and I shall argue again here, that it can, at least in its extremes, be rectified and that any halfway decent world order would rectify it.<sup>6</sup> Yet it goes on, and in some ways at an accelerating pace; and there is little prospect, as things stand, that much, if anything, will be done about it.

One response is that only Band-Aid improvements are *possible* given (a) the depletion of our resources and (b) the way people are wired. Together you get a physical-cum-psychological impossibility argument. What I have called the physical impossibility argument (the state of the world impossibility argument) is very often a physical-psychological impossibility argument. But I will continue to call it the physical impossibility argument for short. The better-off people of the world, the claim goes, can be brought to make some sacrifices, but not the massive sacrifices that, it is claimed, would be necessary to yield anything even resembling a just world order. It is only pious wailing, to no avail and

5 Onora O'Neill, “Justice, Gender and International Boundaries”, in Robin Attfield and Barry Wilkins, eds., *International Justice and the Third World* (London: Routledge, 1992), 50-76; Thomas W. Pogge, “An Egalitarian Law of Peoples”, *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 23/3 (1994), 195-224.

6 Nielsen, “Global Justice ...”, *supra* n.2.

with no point, to lament that. It is like wailing over the occurrence of tornadoes. So we face again the physical impossibility argument.

#### IV

Proponents of an egalitarian form of global justice, such as myself, seek a moral community that would be identical with our biological species. We want a world where everyone has equal moral standing. We have the project — the long-range ideal — “of distributing the planet’s resources in such a way that no human child lacks the opportunities for individual development, the life-chances, available to any other human child”.<sup>7</sup> The difference principle gives expression to what would be the best approximation of that in a world with some inescapable social stratification. Against such egalitarianism, the physical impossibility argument has it that anything like an equality of life chances is obviously impossible given how things are in the world and cannot but continue to be. Even if such human equality were, looked at from the point of view of ideal theory, desirable, it is utterly and obviously unfeasible. In 1900, when William James proposed it, it might, just might, have made some sense. Now, the claim goes, it does not. As Richard Rorty put it, “[i]n 1900, when there were only one and a half billion people in the world, and there were still forests on the land and fish in the sea, such an egalitarian project might have made some sense. But in 2010 we shall have seven billion people, almost no forest and barely any fish.”<sup>8</sup> What might once have been possible — just might have been possible — plainly is no longer possible. No foreseeable application of technology or development of productive forces, the argument goes, could make every human family throughout the world “rich enough to give their children anything remotely like the chances that a family in the lucky parts of the world now take for granted for theirs”.<sup>9</sup> Where there are a vast number of starving or very malnourished people, and not nearly enough food to go round, the people with the food are not going to share it. If I have purchased a loaf of bread and there are a hundred starving children clamouring for a piece, there is nothing I can do to

7 Richard Rorty, “Who are We? Moral Universals and Economic Triage”, *Diogenes* 173 (1996), 20-21.

8 *Supra* n.7, at 13.

9 *Supra* n.7, at 13.

help them. The most that I can do — performing “moral triage” — is arbitrarily to select a couple of them and, somehow isolating them and myself from the rest (if I can), share it with them or give them all of it. But that, the argument goes, is a microcosm of the macrocosm that is our global situation. That is how we — we fortunate few — in the rich nations must behave with the peoples of the poor nations, and particularly with the peoples of the poorest nations, if we would be at all reasonable.<sup>10</sup>

The physical impossibility argument is that there is no feasible “way to make decent life-chances available to the poorer five billion citizens of the member states of the United Nations”.<sup>11</sup> For there to be any chance of doing so at all would require a massive transfer of resources from the members of the wealthy countries to those poor billions. And that those wealthier people will refuse to do. To try to force them, even if justified — as it very well might be if it would work — will not work, for they will resist, and successfully. So even assuming, counterfactually, that there is anyone strategically placed with the will and the means to try to force them, there would be, if such a forcing were attempted, a massive and continued sabotaging of such efforts in all sorts of obvious and not so obvious ways. No such transfer of wealth on a forced basis can be sustained. But, that aside, there plainly is no one with that political will who is in any such strategic position. We have, the argument goes, passed the point of no return in the balance between population and resources. And now, with a vengeance, it is the world of *The Threepenny Opera*. It need not, it is important to keep firmly in mind, be a matter of greed and selfishness on the part of the rich, but rather tough-minded and accurate economic calculation plus a desire to protect their own very fundamental interests and those of their children. This, unless we are going to extend the use of “selfishness”, hardly counts as selfishness. But it does show that few people are willing, over a protracted period of time, deeply to sacrifice themselves and those close to them for the great masses of starving others. Reasonably secure and reasonably well-placed members — such as some of us are or will be — of the great capitalist states of the world are unwilling to make extensive transfers (or even anything resembling them) to the less well off even in

10 Garrett Hardin, *supra* n.3, at 7. Joseph Fletcher, “Give if it Helps but Not if it Hurts”, in William Aiken and Hugh La Follette, eds., *World Hunger and Moral Obligation* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 103-14.

11 *Supra* n.7, at 13.

our own societies, to say nothing of making such transfers to distant and very different and horribly impoverished others. We will not, through educational opportunities and the like, take the steps necessary to give hope to the children of the poor in our midst when doing so for us threatens to deprive our own children of their advantages: the expectation (albeit a diminishing expectation) they have of having a good education followed by good job. As Rawls would put it, the strains of commitment will break here. It will generally be said that that is too much to ask of people. Transfers to the poor, even within our own societies, are acceptable, as a matter of fact, only as long as they are relatively painless.

This “realism” is gaining strength, so that by now there is a new hard-heartedness, regnant, and at least seemingly growing, in the world. What reason do we have to think that these same people (that is us), and indeed poorer members of the same society as well, will be willing to make the massive transfers of resources to the five billion citizens of the impoverished states of the world? But it is — or so the usual argument goes — transfers of this magnitude that are necessary to just keep those people afloat, to say nothing of achieving the kind of equality of which egalitarians have dreamed. Forget about the difference principle, some might say, and just consider meeting their most basic needs: clean water, enough food to eat, some marginally decent human habitation and their most basic health care needs. But that, given the magnitude of the problem, it will be argued, is entirely unfeasible. People will not make such transfers and trying to force them to do so will backfire, even if there were anyone willing to try and with the power to initiate such a programme.

## V

The physical-cum-psychological impossibility argument (the state of the world argument) looks, at least on the face of it, like a strong one. Is there anything, squarely facing that, that can be reasonably said for the possibility of global justice? I think appearances here are deceiving and that when we attend to the empirical facts we will see that there is no technological-cum-psychological imperative, built into the very way things must go in the world — the world that we now inhabit — such that continued impoverishment is inescapable, inescapable because, if we try to achieve global justice, or even some approximation of it, our

resources must just keep on dwindling with the pressure that populations put on them where people live, as so many of them do, in conditions of utter poverty, conditions often inadequate even to sustain life. It is not the case, however, some popular wisdom to the contrary notwithstanding, that, without a draconian neo-Malthusian triage, we will run out of food and other resources necessary to sustain what could be a minimally decent life for everyone on our planet.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, there need not be to achieve this, as such Rawlsians as Charles Beitz and Henry Shue fear, such deep transfers of wealth from the rich nations to the poor ones that rich nations would have “to commit a kind of financial *hara-kiri*”.<sup>13</sup> To go toward a greater global equality, or at least to gain a world in which people live in security with their most basic needs met, the peoples of the developed world need not impoverish themselves — something they will surely not do — so that we end up just spreading the misery around. (It was this that Marx said would happen if we tried *prematurely* to achieve equality.) Thomas Pogge has made it wonderfully clear, working with and from data provided by the *United Nations Human Development Report of 1996*, that no such impoverishment is necessary. He estimates, using this data, that the richest quintile of the world population has well over 90 percent of the world income and the poorest quintile 0.25 per cent. This yields a quintile income inequality ratio of around 400:1. Moreover, it takes into account only income and not wealth. If wealth is taken into consideration the inequality is even greater.<sup>14</sup> This shows, as clearly as can be, that transfers could easily be made to deeply lessen and even to eradicate world poverty without causing any serious inconvenience at all to the wealthy of the world. It should also be noted that the world’s productive forces are already too developed for anything like this impoverishment to be even remotely near to being necessary. *It is not our lack of developed productive powers that keeps us from so meeting needs.*

12 Harriet Friedman, “The Political Economy of Food: The Rise and Fall of the Post-War International Food Order”, in Michael Buraway and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Marxist Inquiries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 248-86.

13 Henry Shue, “The Burdens of Justice”, *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXX/10 (1983), 600-8.

14 Thomas W. Pogge, “The Bounds of Nationalism” in Jocelyne Couture, Kai Nielsen and Michel Seymour, eds., *Rethinking Nationalism* (Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 1996), 441-62.

*It is the way we organise social life along with the utterly uncaring attitudes and even short-sightedness of the wealthy and powerful of this world. It is, to put it bluntly, capitalism, and the attitudes that go with it, and not the world, that is the problem.* Some will think that to say this is not only blunt, but crude. But, crude or not, is it not true?

Consider, to give flesh to my claim, agriculture and land use as key illustrations of how no such impoverishment of people in the capitalist centre is required to achieve at least a minimal global meeting of the most basic needs of human beings. For the foreseeable future we have plenty of available fertile land. There is in fact the agricultural potential, even without a change in technology, adequately to feed a much larger world population than we actually have.<sup>15</sup> Less than half of the available fertile land in the world is being used for any type of food production.<sup>16</sup> Though everyone knows there are severe famine conditions in Africa (to take a salient example), what is less well known is that African agricultural production has been on the decline for the last forty years, though not because of lack of fertile land or of people who could farm.<sup>17</sup> Domestic food production in Africa is falling, while food, formerly given in aid or imported very cheaply from the great capitalist centres (principally the United States), is now imported from those same centres at prices that a very large number of people in Africa simply cannot afford to pay. Similarly in South America: there is plenty of agriculturally usable land that is not used at all or is very inefficiently under-used. In Brazil, for example, there are privately owned farms, badly under-cultivated, the size of small European states. There is plainly the capacity there adequately to feed their populations and allow for exports as well. If, for example, the *Latifundia* system of agriculture were broken up and the land given to landless peasants to intensively cultivate — intensive cultivation being built into their small-scale ways of cultivating — food production would increase enormously.<sup>18</sup> Similar things could be said for the Indian subcontinent. The fact is that in our world there is plenty of food around and much more could be produced. It is a matter, as Amartya Sen has clearly shown, of its distribution and

15 *Supra* n.12, at 16.

16 *Supra* n.12, at 16.

17 *Supra* n.12, at 16.

18 *Le Monde*, April 23, 1996.

of people not having the money or other entitlements to obtain it.<sup>19</sup> It is not at all a matter of our farmland's being used up (*pace* Hardin and Rorty) and that we have exceeded our carrying capacity.

Moreover, while the cheap imports to Africa were still in the offing in the '50s and the '60s, African peasants were paid very little for their produce and were encouraged to leave their farms and come to newly formed industrial centres in their home countries.<sup>20</sup> There was a push in these countries, aided by the transnationals, swiftly to industrialise; and getting the peasants in large numbers into the cities was essential to its success. Large numbers of these peasants moved to the rapidly growing large urban centres of those states trying quickly to industrialise. They were prodded in this direction by the loss of revenue from the farms on which they worked and by the hope of finding work in the industrialising cities. In such circumstances, the lure of food aid or cheap food imports served as a powerful incentive. Moreover, for most of them there was hardly any viable option other than leaving the countryside and moving into the cities. It was there, in the process of such industrialisation, where — and necessarily, given its capitalist structure — a new proletariat and a lumpen proletariat were formed. Where before we had relatively self-subsistent agrarian societies, we have come to have, in these African countries, and elsewhere as well, a newly minted proletariat and lumpen proletariat living and working (when they have work) in, to radically understate it, dreary poverty-stricken urban centres, rife with crime and almost every other imaginable social and physical malady.

What we see happening here is the relentless and formidable growth of a global transnational economy penetrating deeply and pervasively, and with a clear capitalist rationale, into the periphery. And it is there in the periphery, for certain kinds of industries, that these ex-peasants are formed into a proletariat or a lumpen proletariat, the latter functioning as a reserve industrial army. Together they provide a cheap, fantastically exploitable, pool of labour for these transnationals. For these industries, like all capitalist enterprises always in search of profits, move from the centre to the periphery in search of a cheap and reliable labour supply; and, in the process, throw people out of work in the capitalist centres and further erode the strength of the labour movement in the developed

19 Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

20 *Supra* n.12, at 16.

countries. The logic of capitalist international expansion — what we now call globalisation — is indeed acute and has dire consequences for many people in both centre and periphery.<sup>21</sup>

Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that agricultural production in Africa, South America and elsewhere has declined, with Africa being in the most desperate situation, even with half the unused, but quite usable, farmland in the world.<sup>22</sup> If it were used, Africa could adequately feed itself and also become a large exporter of food. Similar, if not quite so drastic, things can, and should, be said about the Indian subcontinent and South America. We do not know exactly what the carrying capacity of the world is (perhaps the very notion doesn't make much sense), but we do know that we are not about to be in a position where it is reasonable to say that the earth has exceeded it. Garrett Hardin's analogy with a lifeboat provides a vivid metaphor. But it is just a metaphor and a misleading and dangerous one at that.<sup>23</sup>

If we look at the rich capitalist centres and at the poor periphery, or what extensionally comes to pretty much the same thing, the North/South imbalance, it becomes plain that the great disparities here, with their resultant maladies, are principally the result of the workings of a capitalist world economic order. A clear exemplification of that, as we have already in part seen, is the world food economy, particularly in relation to industrialisation in the periphery. The stark difference between North and South is apparent in the vast malnutrition and starvation of the South. What we need to recognise, and keep clearly before our minds, is that these famine conditions result from the working of the capitalist economic system in allocating the ability of people to acquire goods, and not from what Mother Earth could provide. The food available to people is principally a matter of income distribution and entitlement. These are things that, in a capitalist system, are fundamentally rooted in workers', and would-be workers', ability to provide, through working, services for which people in their society are willing and able to pay. In the North the rates of involuntary unemployment remain stubbornly high, but they are nothing when compared with the South, where the number of unemployed, or very marginally employed, is staggeringly high — far, far higher, that is, than in the North.

21 Ignacio Ramonet, "Régimes globalitaires", *Le Monde diplomatique*, January, 1997, 1.

22 *Supra* n.12, at 16.

23 *Supra* n.3, at 7.



## VI

In thinking about the world food economy and the global injustice it generates, we should think about the control of the economies, and with that much of the life, of the periphery by the transnational capitalist giants of the centre. In the late '50s and '60s, the United States Government, reflecting plainly not only the interests of its big capitalists, but of the then powerful farm lobby as well, developed a policy of food aid to Third World countries. Many of these countries, as we have already noted, were trying rapidly to industrialise, often under the "inspiration" of the transnationals. This food aid, at one and the same time, provided a lot of inexpensive food for a new, and also a very inexpensive, industrial labour force as well as a respite for the American farmers with their — relative to the market — over-production. As we have seen, a new proletariat was being born in what had once been largely peasant societies. An effective midwife here was the food aid and its related policies of the capitalist centre. Previously largely self-sufficient agrarian societies were being turned into agriculturally dependent societies relying on food supplied by the capitalist centres, first in the form of food aid, later for a while sold cheaply under altered market conditions and now sold at what for those societies are stiff prices, though still of course prices which reflect world market realities. What we have here is a commodification of food and the placing of the Third World countries ever more firmly in the commodity exchange system of the capitalist order.<sup>24</sup> By now (1998) the global food market is dominated by a few giant capitalist corporations. Food aid continues to diminish as the market ever more firmly takes over. The food imports resulting from such capitalist structures continues to create rural unemployment and insecurity. At a Panos briefing at the World Food Summit in Rome (November 1996), it was pointed out that those giant corporations and their subsidiary companies will release food only in response to price opportunities, not to need.<sup>25</sup> But this should hardly be surprising. It is simply the application of the tried and true rationale that makes capitalism tick. As it was earlier when the world food order was developing, so it remains an astute way to help make the world safe for the flourishing of capitalism: but it was also, and still is, a way of

<sup>24</sup> *Supra* n.12, at 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, November 17, 1996, 14.

creating even greater imbalances between North and South — between centre and periphery — and for the creation of the increasingly harsh exploitation of the people of the South, where there exists a enormous labour pool. In such circumstances there is little prospect of the workers being able to force wages up through labour militancy. They are, to understate it, very vulnerable.

Going back a little to gain a sense of how the world food order developed, we can see how things got worse in the '70s compared with what they had been in the '50s and '60s. In the '70s the International Food Order began to come unstuck.<sup>26</sup> By then, in Africa and other parts of the Third World, there were masses of people, most of them previously peasants, who were separated from any direct ties to agriculture, with the great mass of them, forming, as I have already remarked, a cheap labour pool. These people lived (and still do) in conditions of very deep poverty and degradation.<sup>27</sup>

In the capitalist centres grain surpluses dwindled (surpluses that previously had been conveniently sent to the Third World) with much of the grain now being sold instead to what was then the Soviet Union. And, with this, food prices soared in the Third World. *In fine*, the grain aid programme of the '50s gradually lost its capitalist rationale. Few of these newly-minted proletarians, to say nothing of the lumpen proletarians, got any new entitlements to food or, in the case of even the best-off proletarians, anything like adequate entitlements. Commercial markets, even in the periphery, began to work in the sense that some of the urban workers could now just barely afford to buy food under market conditions. But at the same time many people who had previously had access to inexpensive food, both in the urban centres and in the countryside, continued to have the need for food, but, in the newly emergent market system, no longer had the entitlement. They were, and still are, like the poor Bengalis during the great Bengal famine of 1943-44, described by Amartya Sen, when again there was an adequate amount of food around but millions of people lacked the entitlement to purchase it.<sup>28</sup> They had, that is, no purchasing power or any other means to acquire it. In this situation — to return to Africa and like places, with the by now extensively dismantled local agricultural

26 *Supra* n.12, at 16.

27 Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 157-59.

28 *Supra* n.19.

system and the introduction of a new system of cash-cropping for export to the capitalist centre — massive malnutrition and starvation resulted; and it continues to flourish on an accelerated scale. In short, these maladies are in large measure the result of the way the capitalist mode of production has developed. Under our globalising capitalist system there are great masses of people in need of food, but with little in the way of entitlements to it.

Capitalism, of course, needs a workforce and a workforce that can reproduce itself (though as technology advances the size of the workforce will shrink); but with the newly developed industrial enterprises in the Third World a little starvation and malnutrition will not hurt, will not, that is, deleteriously effect the efficiency of such capitalist production, as long as they have, as they indeed have, a large reserve labour pool to draw upon. Some individual workers or potential workers, particularly if they are “difficult”, may just as well starve as long as there are plenty of replacements. Things like this happened with the industrialisation of the Western world under capitalism in the 19th century. They are now being repeated with all the old savagery in the Third World of the 20th century and no doubt will run on unabated to cheer us in the 21st.

So we can see, at least as regards food, that what neo-Malthusians such as Garrett Hardin and Joseph Fletcher take to be just a matter of how the modern world must go has no such necessity at all.<sup>29</sup> *It is rooted not in life nor in the world nor in just how people are wired, but in political and economic choices that need not have been made.*

Though I have not the space to develop it here, basically similar things can be said in respect of pollution, population growth, our fish stocks, forests and the like. We have the know-how significantly to control pollution without committing financial hara-kiri, but we lack the political will to do so.<sup>30</sup> We also have the know-how to manage our forests and our fish stocks so that they can replenish themselves, just as the Thames and the Rhine are coming back to health under improved environmental policies. We have the science in place to limit the pollution here. Moreover, we know the kind and extent of fishing and foresting that also is a major cause of the problem and we know how to fish and forest so that we can keep our forests and fish stocks intact and revive them where they have been depleted. Look at how successfully

29 *Supra* n.10, at 14.

30 See my discussion of Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s important contribution in “Survival and “The Ecological Hypothesis”, *supra* n.2.

the Germans have managed their forests for a very long time and then contrast this with the practice in North America. That German forests are now threatened by pollution does not gainsay that. Their forestry practices are not destroying their forests, pollution is. Again there is no inescapable "technological imperative" built into the world which causes our loss of forests and fish. There is nothing there that we cannot halt and much that we can reverse. And, to shift from pollution to population, population growth, as is well known, levels off with increased wealth and security. Again it is a matter of *political will*. So the first of the great impossibility arguments (the state of the world impossibility argument), the favourite among Neo-Malthusians, is undermined. But, by the very way it was undermined, the political impossibility argument is thereby thrust to the fore and there, many believe, is the rub.

## VII

Transnational capitalist enterprises grow relentlessly and seemingly uncontrollably. They pollute massively, as did the old state industries of state socialism, as they vainly tried to compete with these capitalist enterprises. And governments take only laughable steps to resist. Giant trawlers harvest the seas of the world and checks against them are ineffective. Particularly in the periphery, workers are savagely exploited, with many a would-be worker anxiously waiting in the wings desperately hoping to have the very job where she knows she is going to be savagely exploited. But, she reasons, quite plausibly, at least there is work. With work there is the hope of being able to some extent to ameliorate her destitution and that of her family. What she aspires to is to be able at least to resist what in many instances is such extensive malnutrition that death, or at least an incapacity to work and properly function, is just around the corner. It is difficult for us to imagine the horror of the lives of at least a quarter of the world's population. But it is palpably there and not a figment of our guilty liberal imagination.

Perhaps in some instances — particularly over some environmental issues — capitalist enterprises can be brought to see that there is long-term profit in being more environmentally-friendly. For there to be fish tomorrow, there had better be a more restrained way of fishing today and we had also better do something about the pollution of the sea. For there to be forests tomorrow they had better both stop throwing certain

pollutants into the air and forest differently today, particularly in North America. But even such an avoidance of what economists call public bads is not so easy for capitalism, given competition and the necessity for reasonably short-term profit maximisation. It is worth remembering that for many managers in capitalist firms, the bottom line is to maintain a fairly short-term profit, for they need to keep their shareholders happy. These managers will not think of the long term, if they want to keep their jobs — to say nothing of being upwardly mobile in the managerial scramble. The thing is to make a good showing for about five years and then move on to a more prestigious firm. Taking into account the long term usually does not have a pay-off for them; though here Japanese capitalism, on the one hand, and North American and European capitalism on the other, are not quite the same — Japanese managers are not so vulnerable in this respect. And this may show that the capitalist system has some play here. But, as we saw above, for many managers it does not pay to take the long view. They have to turn out a reasonably quick profit.

However, they do not have the ultimate control, John Kenneth Galbraith to the contrary notwithstanding. The capitalists themselves do take, and they *might* come to take, a somewhat longer-term view, though still with the same self-interested rationale. After all, acid rain falls on rich and poor alike. To discipline their managers to be more efficient and to make a profit, as now the stock market and the threat of take-overs disciplines them, North American and European capitalists could institute something like the Japanese system of managerial control. If they did they might be able to operate with a more long-term interest in mind and this might lead them to be more environmentally friendly.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, the best issues for reform within the capitalist system are such environment-related issues. But with the workforce and their conditions of life, it seems to be another thing. Why should those capitalists who exploit children ten hours a day, seven days a week, in their factories stop until, if indeed that happens, the public outcry gets strong enough to hurt their business badly enough to make it no longer profitable to operate under such labour conditions? That has not happened yet and it may not. Meanwhile these small capitalists have some very cheap and malleable workers who will produce efficiently

31 John Roemer, *Egalitarian Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 291-98.

enough what they want. And there is a seemingly endless supply of children to use for such work coming from desperately impoverished circumstances where their parents are willing in effect to sell them. Better that, the parents might well reason, than for the children themselves, and the rest of the family with them, to starve. As Marx and Brecht so well understood, and so well depicted, life — particularly under primitive capitalist circumstances — can be very, very grim indeed. My earlier term was ‘swinish’, and in fact I see no reason for toning it down except perhaps to conform to current academic conventions. We do not now speak bluntly as philosophers and other intellectuals did in the 18th and 19th centuries. Think, for vivid and powerful examples, of the language of Hobbes and Marx. Perhaps we should resuscitate this practice.

In the capitalist centre *some* of the workforce requires extensive training: but many industries, particularly the type coming into being in the Third World, do not need such a highly trained and, to some extent, educated workforce. Furthermore, given population growth, there are plenty of people around to hire, even people with, where there is need for such, the requisite distinctive skills. Why — capitalism is not the Salvation Army — should they move to a capitalism with a human face? There seem, some exceptional circumstances aside, to be no grounds for such a move that makes good capitalist sense, a sense where money is the bottom line.

*Perhaps*, as both Giovanni Arrighi and Eric Hobsbawm in their studies of 20th century capitalism have argued, capitalism is in the process of self-destructing. But neither thinks that this is so because the proletariat is capitalism’s gravedigger; nor that there is a socialist replacement waiting in the wings.<sup>32</sup> We Marxians used to think that the non-viability of capitalism would lead to socialism, though not without a fight. But this is something we can no longer safely assume. It certainly was never plausible to think it was *inevitable*; that is pure incoherent metaphysics.<sup>33</sup> But it was once plausible to think that it was the likely way things would go after the collapse of capitalism; that the crisis of

32 Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of our Times* (London: Verso, 1994); Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991* (London: Michel Joseph Ltd., 1994).

33 Isaiah Berlin, *Historical Inevitability* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954).

capitalism, something that was itself likely, would usher in, though not without intense struggle, socialism. But it is now no longer plausible to think even that. What is reasonable — or so I shall argue — is to *hope*, and not utterly utopianly, that that is the way things will go and to *struggle to make* things go that way. Moreover (*pace* Hobsbawm and Arrighi) capitalism, though certainly not eternal, has proved surprisingly adaptable and resilient, surviving many a predicted collapse, and learning from its Marxist critics. In making the case for a socialism that can be attained in the lifetime of some of us and in providing the institutional background for the achievement of global justice, we should keep that fact firmly in mind.

More generally — to fasten clearly on the political impossibility argument — whatever the merits of socialism — and I think they are considerable — in popular consciousness, at least in the great capitalist centres, socialism seems to be a spent force.<sup>34</sup> There seems to be little popular belief, and not much professional and academic belief either, that socialism can replace capitalism and provide the political will that capitalism lacks.

## VIII

In trying to see if there can be anything like a good response here, I want at first to proceed indirectly, by saying something that at first may seem counterproductive about a particular development of Marxian theory. Some of us have tried to articulate a no-bullshit Marxianism and to provide a conception of a feasible socialism. With this we could try to begin to meet the political impossibility argument. But it is not very likely that anyone is listening, or at least not enough are listening to make any societal difference; the only kind of difference that in these matters counts. Moreover, even when we gain some fleeting attention, the ideal of a feasible socialism will be met with at least considerable scepticism and not infrequently with scorn. There were the good old days when we were thought to be a danger. Now we are often thought to be a joke.

Such a *Weltbild* notwithstanding, I have argued, and continue to argue, like other analytical Marxians, and not only analytical Marxians,

34 Kai Nielsen, "Analytical Marxism: A Form of Critical Theory", *Erkenntnis* 39 (1993), 1-21.

that we have in place a holistic Marxian social scientific theory that remains the best bet in town for theories of such scale.<sup>35</sup> It is plausible, clearly articulated and systematic. But, like any other social scientific account, it is certainly not written in stone. The very notion of Orthodox Marxism (Georg Lukàcs to the contrary notwithstanding) is an oxymoron. Indeed, we should refer to our account as Marxian, not Marxist, on analogy with “Darwinian” and “Darwinist”. Almost everyone in biology is a Darwinian. No one is a Darwinist. Marxianism is a plausible holistic social scientific theory. Marxism, with its suggestion of “Orthodox Marxism”, is a dogma. Marxianism is subject to continued refinement and modification and is not, thankfully, immune from disconfirmation. Moreover, I think such analytical Marxians as G.A. Cohen, Jon Elster, Andrew Levine, David Schweickart, John Roemer, Philippe van Parijs, and Erik Olin Wright have articulated conceptions of a feasible and normatively sound socialism. It is — being quite explicitly normative — egalitarian and democratic. Their views, of course, are by no means identical, but taking them together we can, occluding some of the differences, gain a common picture of a feasible and humanly attractive socialism backed up by a carefully articulated descriptive-interpretative-explanatory social theory and a careful and plausible normative account. Schweickart and Roemer in particular have carefully developed conceptions of market socialism which, I believe, are of great importance.

However, and this is crucial for our considerations here, the cogency of the reasoning of analytical Marxians is not here the paramount point. The question at issue here — the political impossibility problem — is whether *socialism is on the historical agenda or can be put on the historical agenda. It is the question of whether there is any reasonable prospect of achieving socialism in anything like the foreseeable future.* The worry is that our accounts are just utopian; socialism with a professorial face. Roemer and Schweickart have shown how very sensible and theoretically workable market socialism is — at least on paper — and how attractive it is as well, at least from where we are now, where, with apologies to Isaac Deutscher’s fine vision of things, there are very few socialist persons around. Roemer and Schweickart have shown that market

35 Andrew Levine, “What is a Marxist Today?” in Robert Ware and Kai Nielsen, eds., *Analyzing Marxism* (Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 1989), 29-58; Nielsen, *supra* n.34.



socialism could be both efficient and fair.<sup>36</sup> And they have shown how well it fits with the egalitarian aspirations of socialism and with its democratic commitments. That is all fine. But there are those who will say, and not implausibly, that it still suffers from “a disabling weakness: the absence of any *politics* of a viable socialism”.<sup>37</sup> Analytical Marxians seek to argue for economic realism, and in some ways they succeed; but they still suffer, it is argued, from a bad form of *political* utopianism, to wit the advancing of a “desirable goal with little or no specification of its possible constituency, agency or strategy”.<sup>38</sup> They have forgotten Marx’s stress on the integral relation of theory and practice and his stress, which was also Dewey’s, on never attending to ends without a careful attention to means. We should always be reasoning within a means-ends continuum. Roemer sees that, but then in effect ignores it. He remarks, rightly, that “for any end state of a social process to be feasible, a path must exist from here to there, and so at least a rough sketch of possible routes, if not a precise map, may reasonably be asked of someone attempting to describe the final destination”.<sup>39</sup> That is exactly right. But neither Roemer nor Schweickart, nor any of us, have provided such a map for our present situation. It is right to say that we need not have a precise map, but we need to have some guidelines concerning how to get from the mess we are in now to a socialist world. Analytical Marxians have provided us with a good understanding of how socialism is to be democratic, and, roughly speaking, the kind of egalitarianism that should be the aspiration for a just world; and they have refuted F.H. Hayek’s claim that market socialism is an oxymoron. Roemer, in doing the latter, shows nicely how a market socialism could combine efficiency and equality. But that is all on paper. How do we proceed to institute such a socialism, or any socialism? How do we bring it about in the real world and provide some reasons to believe it could be stable? What do we do to incline people to socialism whose life experiences with what once was really existing socialism do not incline them to socialism; what

36 John Roemer, *Egalitarian Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); John Roemer, *A Future for Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); David Schweickart, *Against Capitalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

37 Gregory Elliott, “Balance-sheets and Blueprints”, *Radical Philosophy* 76 (1996), 41-43, at 42.

38 *Supra* n.37, at 342.

39 Roemer, *A Future for Socialism*, *supra* n.36, at 126.

do we do to receive assent from people in societies such as our own who have been deeply and in various ways inoculated against socialism? The question remains, that is, *how do we now get socialism on the historical agenda?* Admittedly, particularly for the poorest quarter of the world's population, the world is a wretched place; but the *political* impossibility argument still seems very strong. Moreover, where the wretched of the earth have out of the wretchedness of their lives the will to try to construct socialism, they lack the material means necessary for such construction; and where people in the great capitalist centres have the means to do so they lack the political will. Where they are motivated they cannot and where they can they are not motivated. We have to find a way out of this.

There is another form of political impossibility argument that again raises the haunting spectre for us socialists of the absence in the Roemer/Schweickart type of arguments for market socialism of any *politics* of a viable socialism. I want to state and then consider that argument.<sup>40</sup> A not inconsiderable part of the ability of capital to increase global inequality, the argument goes, stems from (a) its ability to move freely around the planet seeking out cheap labour and (b) from its ability to restructure (outsourcing now being capitalistically mandatory). The most influential and powerful capitalist enterprises — the key players in the capitalist game — have global scope, structure and operation.<sup>41</sup> Market socialist solutions such as those of Roemer and Schweickart look suspiciously like socialism in one country or at least one country at a time. Moreover, suppose we were to get a political majority in one country in favour of implementing market socialist changes along something like the lines of the models they propose. If that were in the offing, this political impossibility argument has it, then, well before the fact, there would be capital flight from the country in question with the immediate effect that the country where the wind was blowing in this way would be a little poorer and certainly less secure. People — great masses of people — would anticipate this and would not vote for these changes. So the institution of a market socialism experiment could not even commence unless it were to be instituted internationally from the start. But there is fat chance of that, so market

40 I owe something like this to Jay Drydyk, though I am not holding him to just how I put it.

41 Ignacio Ramonet, "Régimes globalitaires", *Le Monde diplomatique* (1997), 1.

socialism proposals are in a bad sense utopian after all.

I think that the capital outflow problem would not be that transparent to most voters and, more importantly, to say that it must be international from the start is too strong. But, that notwithstanding, I do accept the spirit of the argument. That is to say, I think that it is right to argue that market socialism, if it is to be a model that could have a stable exemplification, could not be for just one country or small cluster of countries for the reasons — centrally the flight of capital reasons — given above. Indeed shoe factories, or even computer factories, can move around the world, but heavy industry cannot, or at least not so easily. Still, there will in all likelihood be a great flight of capital from a country going socialist. What is essential for market socialism to work is that it come into being in the large and most powerful, as well as the large and more or less powerful, industrial countries, including places like Brazil, Argentina, Chile, South Africa, Russia, Vietnam and China, at approximately the same time. Then there would be no workable place for capitalism to flee to. But it does not seem to me more unlikely (or at the least much more unlikely) that such socialist conceptions of society could not gain support in all such countries — or at least in most of them — at about the same time than that they would catch fire in just a single country; or that, at least after a decade or so of struggle, they might come together on market socialism and give it a real political life. As my scenarios in the next sections will bring out, these societies, as different as some of them are in certain respects, are all subject to similar pressures and their citizens could reasonably be expected to come to have similar aspirations. Moreover, the socialist movement has always been an internationalist movement. A commitment to *market* socialism, as a way socialists intend to proceed (its value being purely instrumental), would be a part of that internationalist movement. Furthermore, the movements in individual countries would gain increased support and reasonability from the knowledge that there were similar movements afoot in other countries and in solidarity with them, a solidarity that would just go with their being socialist. All this is presupposed in the arguments I give and in the scenarios I articulate below. The more pressing problem, in my estimation, is how to get the project off the ground anywhere.

## IX

The political impossibility argument — the general one I stated before the above rather extended aside — not only seems strong: it is strong and I am tortured by it. It is part of what inclines me to think that to speak of global justice is indecent. Not even a simulacrum of it — or so at least it seems — is on the historical agenda. I want in closing to say something, admittedly with not very much confidence, about how perhaps there is after all a way to a feasible and reasonable socialism and how, if that is so, global justice may someday be approximated. (As things stand now there is no hope even remotely to approximate it.) But I do this while ambivalently worrying whether this is just another instance of socialism with a professorial face and a rather moralistic one to boot. But I also remember Antonio Gramsci's famous dictum concerning the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will.

So what possibilities are there for getting from here to there? I shall give an extended scenario, stating what I hope and believe may be some mass political *possibilities* — the only kind of possibilities that can, and indeed should, deliver the goods. I shall describe these various possibilities for different contexts. In giving my scenario here, I shall interlace comments on how a market socialism could effectively come into play in these situations: how it could, and should, find an instantiation in the world (not just in single societies) where the mass phenomena I shall describe are coming into being. That is to say, for it to have an instantiation, the putative mass phenomena I describe must actually be coming into being. I shall describe how, if that is so, there could be an interaction there, an interaction, if you will, between theory and practice. The clear and convincing articulation of what a market socialism and its effective dissemination might be would help sustain the mass phenomena, give them a direction, and help give the people who are part of these mass phenomena a reasonable hope, a confidence and belief that what they are doing makes sense and might very well yield a feasible socialism. There will emerge, for a critical mass of people struggling for socialism, and including in their ranks intellectuals who construct these models, the conviction that these models are not merely something for intellectuals to play with, but that they provide models for real-life possibilities. They model, that is, something we should struggle to make the case.

Stated just like that, what I have just said is something of a dark saying. But I shall make it clear, or at least clearer, as I proceed. There are, of course, other scenarios, including many that would continue to push the political impossibility line. Some of them — including most particularly the more pessimistic ones — may be more plausible than mine, delineating more accurately and realistically how things are *likely* to go for us. What I am claiming is that the scenarios I shall describe are in the realm of *empirically reasonable political possibilities*. Political cynicism and despair are so deep that some may not even grant that. But then I would like to know just why what I shall say does not describe a reasonable *possibility*. I did not say it was the most probable possibility; rather I claim it is a reasonable one, describing something which it is not unreasonable to believe might come to obtain. Moreover, if what I shall describe is such a possibility, then it is enough to remind ourselves that we are also, or at least can be, political actors in the world as well spinners of what we hope are not just-so stories.

In giving my interpretative description I shall divide things up. I shall talk first about Eastern Europe and what once was the Soviet Union; then about Western Europe and North America; and finally about the western side of the Pacific Rim. What we should say about Africa seems to me to be less clear, beyond saying that South Africa, in spite of all its difficulties, will need to lead the way by providing the spark for, and being in some important ways the motor and the initial sustainer of, the other African states.

Speaking first of what was once part of the old Soviet Empire, I want to say that there the prospects of a move to return to socialism or communism, this time thoroughly democratically rooted, are real and that this thought may not be just the passing nostalgia of many for the security, such as it was, of the past. It is also possible — and this is where theoretical considerations come in — that in some, perhaps all, of those societies, market socialism will have a genuine chance of being tried out. People will want security, including, of course, confidence that their basic needs will be met. But they will not want a return to the rigidities and inefficiencies of the old command economy. Here I think they may be receptive to an intelligently and practically set out conception of market socialism. We may be able to go from Roemer's and Schweickart's theoretical conceptions to real-world social experiments. People, or at least very many of them, were thoroughly fed up with the old Soviet Thermidor. But the new capitalist society has

turned out, in ways that most of them hadn't anticipated, to be a nightmare. Indeed, in many ways, though not all, the new free market societies have turned out to be very definitely worse than the really existing socialisms of their not so distant past. Fed up with chaos, with promises not being kept, salaries not being paid or becoming meaningless with inflation; and fed up too with crime, violence, the drastic lowering of their standards of living and with the new class of Mafia-style capitalist gangsters emerging into prominence and power, the peoples of the former Soviet Union, or at least many of them, may be ready for another try at socialism, this time without dictatorship and a command economy, or at least with an economy that is some coherent mixture of market and command, or at least market and plan. Those wishing to make such a move failed in the last election, but they garnered, under difficult circumstances, many votes; and if things continue to deteriorate, or even just stay as they are, they may very well come to power in the next election in spite of the best efforts of Western capitalist states to see to it that they do not. If such a social experiment gets under way, the people doing the planning, and the general population as well, will no doubt be ready for intelligently articulated plausible market socialist conceptions. The East Europeans (former East Germans, Poles, Hungarians, Bulgarians, etc.) who have seen certain important things in their lives deteriorate since the arrival of freedom, may, while continuing to prize freedom — but no longer (if they ever did) identifying it with economic neo-liberalism — be open to intelligently worked out conceptions of market socialism. As I write this (January 1997) 40% of the workforce in the former East Germany are out of work.

Market socialism is something that can perhaps give us what is good about both capitalism *and* the old state socialism while avoiding what is bad about both. It can be efficient while preventing the emergence of a small dominating wealthy capitalist class, while honouring commitments to equality and security and remaining thoroughly democratic. Here may be a place where there is real social space for something like the Schweickart/Roemer models to have a thorough testing, though surely, as Schweickart and Roemer very well realise themselves, their conceptions will come to be modified in that very testing. We might in time get something like an efficient and thoroughly democratic socialism with an egalitarian orientation and with the genuine commitment of its citizens. A feasible socialism emerging from where we are now and with

citizens socialised as we are socialised cannot yield the full measure of egalitarian aspiration. But it can move us in the right direction by moving us to a far greater equality than we have now. It is a socialism for the short term. The long term — if we ever get there — would involve the coming into being of socialist persons.<sup>42</sup> But for now the short term is that for which we must strive. I do not say, let me repeat, that it will happen, but that it could. There is work here for us — that is we radical intellectuals — to do in articulating a clear conception of what socialism can and should be and in tying this conception to the political and economic struggles of our time. We socialists can, and should, forget about funny books and a fixation on cultural critique and put our shoulders to the wheel.

I turn next to a mass phenomena conception of what might transpire in the great capitalist centres in Europe, North America and the Pacific Rim. There — and most particularly in North America — socialism in any form is now standardly taken to be a ridiculous non-starter. It is widely thought that the capitalist winning of the cold war decisively established that. Socialism is, popular conception has it, anti-democratic and, what is even more fundamental — because it is taken to just go with the system — very inefficient to boot. It is an organisation of social life that results in poverty and economic stagnation, the good intentions, including what could be democratic intentions, of socialist planners notwithstanding. It is hard in many (though not all) of these capitalist centres to get a voice for even the mildest social democracy, let alone for socialism, no matter how democratic and market socialist a programme it has. (The United States of America, of course, is the most extreme case. So as not to lose our balance, it is important to remember that Scandinavia and some of the nations of Southern Europe are different. There, of course, social democracy is very strong.)

Socialism is not something that at present great masses of people are prepared to take seriously (particularly in North America). Why *might* this change? Conservative, liberal and even mildly social democratic governments — Scandinavia a little bit to the side — have served capitalist interests, though perhaps, for the social democratic ones, sometimes out of the conviction (honourable in itself) that there is no other *feasible* alternative. The genuine social democrats among them just try to tame the beast a little bit.

42 Isaac Deutscher, *On Socialist Man* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1967).

Let me now give some reasons why this pervasive capitalist orientation might, just might, change. Under capitalist economic policies, people have been told for a long time now that they have to tighten their belts. Above all, we are told, again and again, in capitalist society after society, that we must bring the deficit down. This is a general, and incessantly repeated, capitalist refrain. We cannot continue to live beyond our means and we must realise that there is no such thing as a free lunch. It is not hard to see here who really determines things. This goes on, as one bourgeois government replaces another, with the various mainstream parties always singing, particularly when they are in office and an election is not in the offing, much the same tune and carrying out much the same policies, though some rather more draconically than others. (Compare in Canada Saskatchewan and Ontario in 1996.) All the while poor people in all these societies find it harder and harder to make ends meet. Moreover, more of them are becoming unemployed or only marginally and insecurely employed. This happens while people in the so-called middle class come to be, with their high tax burden, increasingly set against the poor. But they also see, in addition to their heavy taxation, their salaries, purchasing power, working conditions and social safety nets all increasingly and relentlessly eroded. Indeed, a not insignificant number of them are not so securely in the middle class as they used to be able just to assume. They may find themselves or their children becoming a part of the poor they deride. In the United States, for example, there is more inequality now than there has been since the 1920s and, according to The World Development Movement, an estimated 30 million people suffering from malnutrition.<sup>43</sup> There is a slippery slope, down which not a few people are sliding, from lower middle class respectability to poverty. Life for more and more people is becoming more difficult and more insecure. Faced with these things over a number of years, with different governments coming and going, all heavy on promises of a brighter future but short on delivery, perhaps both the poor and the not so poor (but not so wonderfully well-off and getting less well off from year to year) may very well stop believing in the excuses of their governments, whose officials are in effect representatives, sometimes more fully, sometimes less, of the capitalist class and who serve their interests. A critical mass of people may stop believing that what they are

<sup>43</sup> *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, November 17, 1996, 14.



experiencing is necessary pain for long-term gain and they may begin, in one way or another, to revolt. How is it, they may very well ask, that we must be so badly off, and so increasingly badly off, in a world where the productive capacities of our societies continue to grow? To say that all the same, that growth notwithstanding, we must continue to make sacrifices for a rather elusive commonweal, will come, more and more and to more and more people, to seem like an economist's deception. It is rather likely that their revolt, in North America at least, will first take the form of siding with right-wing, more or less libertarian parties, such as the Reform Party in Canada or their more radically right and more religiously-embedded counterparts in the United States of America. The militia phenomenon in the United States is in this respect very interesting: that a not inconsiderable number of people are coming to see their government as the enemy to be struggled against is not insignificant.

In Europe its form is more likely first to be corporatist: something like Le Pen in France and the neo-fascists in Italy. But, if the Left's reading of social economic realities is near to the mark, and here we share common ground with more or less Keynesian welfare-state liberals, such right-wing programmes (whether libertarian or corporatist) will not work. After a few years with such people in power, it will become plain to great masses of people that the Right cannot deliver the goods.

So what it is reasonable to expect is this: the old liberal-conservative *status quo* will fail. In terms of Canadian politics, Mulroney and Chrétien come to look more and more alike as do Clinton and Lott for the politics of the United States of America. And none of them will, to put it minimally, seem very attractive. Already we have references in the mainstream media to choosing the least worst. Disenchantment and cynicism are very pervasive. The number of people voting in the U.S.A., in spite of concerted efforts to get out the vote, is consistently decreasing. The ruling order has given people (a few wealthy elites aside) nothing but years of telling them that they must make sacrifices so that, eventually, things can get better, while in reality things just continue to get worse for all strata (again, a small elite apart). With this, the gap between the rich and the poor increases and more and more people, more or less in the middle, get pushed into the ranks of the poor. But, unlike at present, they will by then also have seen — graphically — that the right-wing programmes, initially expected to counter this, actually make things even worse. To anticipate a little: in Ontario, with the

right-wing Harris government in power and pushing a radically conservative agenda, the Rae government (a former conservative social democratic government) comes to look pretty good, and it will begin to look even better, though still not very good, when the Harris' big tax cut does not work the miracle that the middle class expects. When the effects of radical right policies have had the time to sink in, for poor and the middle strata alike — and this after years of false promises from standard conservative/liberal governments — then “the middle class” will no longer be able to believe that things will get better if governments just reign in those welfare bums, cut taxes and more generally get off people's backs. In such circumstances, “the middle class”, along with the poor, may be ready, in some more thorough way, to attune themselves to different options and to come to revolt. Options that are not open to them now will become significant for them. And there is our chance and there is the cash value of Schweickart, Roemer and others having worked out practically feasible models of market socialism that actually start from where we are now and recommend changes, some of which would rapidly become operative, so as manifestly and immediately to improve the welfare of great masses of people as well as increasing their control over how things go. What now is merely utopian may — and not in any greatly distant future — cease to be so. A pervasive cynicism about politics may very well defeat us; but then again it may not. We are never going to escape contingency here or anywhere else. But movement in a progressive direction is possible. That is why such intellectual work is so important and not just spitting into the wind.

What I have said about North America and Europe should also apply to Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan (if there will still be such a place) and similar countries. There remain China and Indo-China. There we still have what nominally would be called communist systems, bad to very bad on the democratic and egalitarian side, but having nonetheless become societies oriented by leaders who are what would in Mao's time have been called capitalist roaders. But they are (particularly in China) building up their productive powers at a fantastic rate, though at a not inconsiderable present expense to a good portion of their population, showing clearly how there can be, and indeed under certain circumstances is, exploitation under socialism as well as under capitalism. But there *may* be no other way to go to make China a wealthy industrial nation that could then — eventually — make socialism a reality. (I am, remember,

not saying that this will happen, but only that it could.) It was not only the Mensheviks but Marx himself who stressed that socialism builds on the back of capitalism. Marx did not think this a pretty picture and it certainly is not. But without developed productive forces, by trying to go directly for socialism and equality, we can only spread the misery around. As Marx delicately put it, we shall get the same old shit again. However, as China becomes an industrial giant, the Chinese people may begin to demand, and to be in a position to get, genuine socialism and with it genuine democracy. (Indeed, where they are genuine, the two go together like hand and glove.) And, particularly with their long legacy of Marxism, they may very well succeed — though they may repeat Russia's mistake, with their Marxism becoming something of a façade. And then the story for China, and for Indo-China as well, gets longer and more like that of Eastern Europe and what once was the Soviet Union. But the scenario, *contra* the political impossibility argument, still remains fundamentally the same. It will just be, if things so transpire, a longer march for the people of those countries.

## X

To return now to a more general stance. It has been evident for a long time that the productive forces of the world are sufficiently developed to institute socialism. It is ideology and capitalist political and cultural domination, plus much, though not all, of the history of the Soviet Union and China which make socialism seem both undesirable and completely impossible. Against this background, we get the first impossibility claim, that the very state of the world makes socialist egalitarian aspirations (which, broadly speaking, are also the Rawlsian-Dworkinian-Senian liberal egalitarian aspirations) to a more egalitarian world — where people, with their basic needs met, could be both secure and in control of their lives — impossible. But, as we have seen, this state of the world impossibility claim is false. So what we are left with is the claim of socialism's *political unachievability*. I have tried to sketch a scenario where this is put in question. What is now politically unfeasible could, and in the not too distant future, become feasible. However, we should not forget that, speaking globally, even if things go the way my scenario depicts a lot of inequalities will remain for a long while and indeed for a while they will be stark inequalities, though not so stark as now. Socialism, as Roemer soberly stresses, will take a long time in its

building.<sup>44</sup> But it is vital that we can very soon see something of its progress toward its goal. People have been lied to or told fairy tales far too often and far too long. But that *moving toward* socialism's egalitarian goals can be accomplished. Unlike with psychoanalysis, things do not have to get worse before they get better. Important changes could be made immediately, so that the plight of the worst-off 800 million of the world would not be so terrible. That can be done, and done, as we have seen, without the wealthier parts of the world impoverishing themselves or even seriously inconveniencing themselves. It would give people hope who now have no hope and it would start us — and with a vivid sense of a start — on the long march to an egalitarian society, where we would no longer feel it is indecent to say, because it is at best so empty and at worst so hypocritical, that people have equal moral standing.

44 Roemer, *Egalitarian Perspectives*, *supra* n.36, at 322.