

Ecology and Socialism, by Chris Williams, [Haymarket Books] 2010

Review
2011

Thomas A. Burns, Ph.D.

Chiloquin, Oregon

Williams offers a well documented and well reasoned assessment of the negative effects of capitalism on society and world ecology. He correctly identifies the rise of capitalism with the advent of agriculture and complex society, which it supported. Williams finds virtually nothing positive in the capitalist based economy, and he suggests that the only solution is for capitalism to be replaced by a full-on version of socialism. Williams' critique relies heavily on the arguments against capitalism made in the works of Marx and Engels, which he quotes extensively. He even thanks his "comrades" for the contributions they have made to this work. In my view, the extent of this constant Marxian referencing detracts from the potential effectiveness of the work in reaching his intended audience, which is those in positions of influence in capitalist oriented western countries. Rhetorically, I think that Williams can deliver his devastating critique of free enterprise capitalism without invoking Marx and calling forth in his audience all of the negative "communistic" associations that attend Marx's works.

The modern economic sphere is institutionally a continuum from free enterprise to full-blown communism. In broad categories, capitalism and socialism are next to one another on this continuum with socialism committing to social values to the point where government owns, operates and directly controls major infrastructure enterprises and services. Communism merely carries the socialist goals of equality in economy the extra leg to the left with communal ownership of nearly all property, while regulated capitalism trends to the right of pure socialism and puts the breaks on free enterprise – more or less. Williams could potentially have a much greater impact for his message if he called for a much more highly regulated capitalism, a version of capitalism that requires that it operate within broadly identified social and ecological limits and defined goals.

From my point of view, the essential issue in all of culture, including the social and ecological domains, is balancing individualistic [competitive] values and social [communal] values. And the communal values of respect and cooperation apply not just to support equality in society but also to underpin a sustainable approach to the human use of natural resources. That is the central message in virtually all of my own work. We lose when we go to either extreme and mistakenly think that the answer is either to rely solely on individual competition and personal [corporate] gain or to deny all reward for individual

initiative in the name of absolute equality and the communal good. Neither approach is real to the fundamental traits of humans, and both extremes are imbalanced. The problem in much of western culture, and especially in American culture, is that we are in a state of imbalance with the individualistic [competitive] capitalist side of the equation significantly favored over the communal side. This leaning is exemplified currently by the conservative [individualistic] Tea Party reaction to the financial recession, which was ironically caused by runaway capitalism [individualism in the corporate mode]. So far, this conservative swing is only mildly offset by the progressive [communal] Occupy Wall Street Movement, which at least has correctly identified the target for public outrage. It is simply the fact that communal or community values have considerably less weight in America, and so capitalism is too little regulated and minimally required to meet social and ecological goals.

In the last 30 years this situation in America has only become more aggravated since in the world economy, where regulation in developing countries tends to be much weaker, capitalism largely operates with a free rein – free enterprise. This situation puts added pressure on businesses in western countries where the additional costs incurred to meet social and ecological regulations reduce comparative competitiveness and encourage outsourcing. Unfortunately, the response in American society since Reagan has been to weaken regulation of the corporate and financial domains and to loosen environmental controls. The overall consequence of this response has been to accept much greater risk of world economic collapse as capitalism has been permitted to engage in high risk ventures in the pursuit of maximal, short term gain [profit].

Balance for western culture must now be sought on an international, world-wide basis if it is to be achieved at all since individual nations trying to go it alone put their economies at risk. Unfortunately, the capitalist based forces led by the World Trade Organization and international financial interests have been effective in blocking any significant progress in corralling the overall deregulated world-wide economic condition. As Williams points out, this circumstance invites a mega economic disaster, while it encourages the irresponsible and unsustainable managing of natural resources. Clearly insufficiently regulated capitalism on a world basis has created a condition that is out of control both economically and ecologically. But, is eliminating capitalism altogether the answer, as Williams suggests?

Personally, I think we can achieve the balance that is needed without going all the way to full-blown socialism and government ownership of all major infrastructure and services. Williams assumes capitalism must be overthrown because as a system it borders on being inherently “evil.” For me, Williams fails

to respect the predatory side of the human species which gives rise to competition and assures biological survival, which when expressed in complex society underpins the survival of the fittest among economic enterprises. My view is that it is futile to try to deny our predatory side as a species, whether our competitive orientation is expressed at the personal or social or corporate level. What we can do is recognize the need to give communal values more weight and input in all of our decisions, including our expectations and requirements for socially and environmentally responsible corporate behavior.

Humans have had to balance competition and cooperation in all domains of culture in accord with the “decision” of their predecessor primates to give up on the organizing structure of the dominant male and his harem of females and adopt the herd or band community of multiple males and females and their offspring all living together as the best way to achieve security and to perpetuate the species. Over the 150,000 years of humans living in simpler hunter-gatherer societies, most aboriginal cultures achieved a balance between the forces of competition and cooperation. In modern complex society, capitalism is not inherently evil. It just has the ability to carry humans back in the direction of the harem and beat down all challengers using any means possible, if its individualistic inclinations are not restrained by the requirement to engage in its pursuits under a societal umbrella of communal cooperation and environmental sustainability. Think of the mechanisms employed by some societies to exercise such restraint: the potlatch among Northwest Coast tribal cultures, where the individual gains status by giving away all of the excess that he has accumulated beyond his personal need. Or consider the Norwegian’s tax on bank account principal as well as income and their collective tax on income to the point where in the 1970’s there was virtually no gain if an individual’s income exceeded \$100,000.

In the 19th century we learned that free enterprise capitalism did not work because it led to plutocracy and undermined the goals of equality in our democratic [communal] and equal justice ideals. In the 20th century, we substituted regulated capitalism in its place, and we have been fighting over the appropriate degree of this regulation ever since. Ecological respect and relative social and economic equality can be decimated by out of control capitalism – as Williams rightly points out, but this is not a necessary result of all forms of capitalism. We can choose to locate our economic institutions [even at a world-wide scope] further along the continuum toward communal values and so retain the benefits of innovation and efficiency that can accrue from the motive of personal [corporate] gain – benefits that are integral to capitalism. And from a more balanced and communally responsible position, we can require ecological sustainability and limit social and economic inequality. And we can do this

without repeating the mistakes of 20th century communism and killing the motive for innovation and the reward and recognition for effort [personal or corporate].

For me, Williams misses the most balanced location on the continuum of economic institutional choices, and risks throwing out the baby with the bathwater. At the same time, much of what Williams observes about the very negative social and ecological effects of unrestrained capitalism is spot on. But in my view his observations do not justify his conclusion that full-on socialism is the only viable solution. Through our democratic political structure, we can evolve to create a sufficiently regulated capitalism within our economic structure – nationally and internationally. And we can take money out of American politics so our congressional representatives make decisions in the name of the overall public [communal] good rather than in response to campaign contributions by the “highest bidder” among the wealthiest lobbyists. It would take a full-blown revolution to take us all the way to the version of socialism that Williams envisions. I am not looking for revolution because such disruptions can just as easily invite an ending exactly the opposite of the one Williams seeks.