

Socialism, Envy and Redistribution

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Envy is much older than any political system or any political ideology. Envy does not exist because socialism exists. Rather, socialism refers to and needs envy. Several theorists of socialism are even bold enough to develop a programme which promises to remove all reasons for feeling envious (in a classless society, for example). In my view, all these steps may be well meant, but they are quite hopeless. Envy is not constrained to the have-nots and those set back and impoverished. Furthermore, socialism is not the only system that a political servicing of envy. The racists and nationalists of all colours also subscribe to these emotions. The socialists, however, take it as their call to build a troop of followers out of the existing resentment which of necessity is present in a pluralistic unconstrained society, and motivate them with promises of "more justice through more redistribution". (All this was only too apparent in the latest German election.) Since these days everyone defines poverty in relative terms, such promises can by definition never be kept (unless there existed only one wage level for absolutely everyone). The generally rising living standards always bring about various new frustrations to various groups. So here we have a situation where the bipolar world of the envious and the envied (with many possible overlappings) is supplemented by a third group - the bureaucrats and political redistributors who service the envy. Not only that, they make their living out of the unfeasible promises to smooth out or eliminate inequality which, they say, would remove the incentives to envy. What a lucrative and pleasant business this is indeed! Those that practise it believe that this is "social". I beg to differ.....

"Modern industrial society" connives this vicious circle of redistribution. It is popular with both the potential recipients and the wealthy, making it the most probable outcome of a majority decision. The concession by the rich to the redistributive welfare state policies (the tax-some-and-give-to-others principle) is naturally for reasons different from "revealed envy". For the better-off the state redistribution is a form of hedging against the possibility of being envied. The super-rich like it because they can insure themselves thereby against social unrests. That these are not the "altruistic" benevolent motives is only too obvious an observation. A skilful "serviceman" can use envy in this way not only to make "good politics", but also good money. It is quite evident that the "thirst for more" can easily become an obsession not only of the supported, but of everyone in the society. This obsession is directed at all kinds of goods, but especially at those which do not need to be created but can be obtained through the redistributive system.

When we speak of "the supported" in relation with redistribution, it is fully in the liberal sense of a subsidiary aid. However, many social democrats suspect the model of interpersonal aid and want to replace it with legally binding entitlements. They don't want to accept the image of a minority of supported who have no other option, and of a majority of self-standing supporters. And they will not cease till they have turned everyone into dependants and connected them to the system of redistribution which caters for lives "from cradle to grave". All under the motto "Support must come from and go unto everyone" (Ruth Dreifuss).

This all is not to say that there was nothing good to be found in a redistributive welfare state. In the social realm it allowed us for a limited period a life without much internal tension; a kind of "Peace for our time". Yet eventually the additional engineered layers of construction meant that the assumed social roles were only affordable through increasing indebtedness. This means that

we merely transfer the costs of redistribution onto the future generation.
And that is anything but sustainable, anything but social-friendly.