

From each according
to his ability, to each
according to his
needs essay



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I suppose it's worth setting the question, what with the author's brand of political and economic theory now lying defeated and its opponent, capitalism, in ruder health, it seems, than ever before. The generations that were inspired by its clarion call are dying off and modern society is forgetting there ever was a political alternative to economic individualism.

"From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," now seems outmoded, inefficient, unsafe even, when contrasted with the powerful rationalising forces of the global market, which has individual choice as its base and a record of delivering riches. And yet...

the call still seems as strong as ever, the words still possess the power to move, the desire for such a society is still there, latent in us all. How can this be when marxism as a theory is universally derided, its assumptions scorned, its conclusions proved wrong by time? Perhaps it speaks to a deeper part of the self, that little bit tucked away in even the most confident and aggressive of people, that speck of humanity that wants life to be fair, not perfect, just fair. In this essay, I will attempt to sketch out the long history of a message such as this, noting that Marx just packaged it in the most poetic way, before suggesting that its time will come again, and may already, in fact, be alive and well and governing the country as this very moment. By charting this course I intend to show that "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" has a universal usefulness and that the death of communism as an ideology has helped to finally make it a realistic political slogan once again.

To begin with, let us examine the possible roots of such a message. The bible, with its words written in stone, seems a good place to start. “ The kingdom of heaven is as when a man, going into another country, called his own servants, and delivered them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one; to each according to his several ability” (Matthew 25: 14). If that passage seems to echo “ from each according to his ability”, then there are even clearer connections in the description of the apostles witnessing the resurrection. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold.

And laid them down at the apostles’ feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need” (Acts 4: 34 and 4: 35). And just in case there was any doubt about what could be called its communistic message, Act 4: 32 states: “ And the multitude of them that believed were of the heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common. What we see being expounded here is the abolition of private property in order to gain in spirituality and the fair allocation of work and reward. Pretty radical stuff from the establishment you might think, but then Christianity didn’t start out as the bastion of nations that it is today. It was a movement founded under occupation and its message that all men are equal under god was a powerful one, particularly in slave-based societies such as that of Rome, from which Christianity spread across the empire. The speed of Christianity’s adoption also hints at its radical nature, particularly if viewed from a dialectical perspective, where new modes of thought emerge by resolving the flaws

inherent in the old ideology - in this case the view that there is a natural hierarchy amongst mankind or that certain races are superior to others.

A Marxist theory of history would also note that every new wave of thought must be founded on, or at least presented as, "universally valid ideas" in the "common interest" (1). However, these weren't new ideas as such, with communist thought also being found in the much older Jewish Torah and in classical Greece, as sketched out by Gustave Le Bon in the following passage. "Communism as a theory of government and social reform may be said, in a limited sense, to have begun with the ancient Greek idea of the Golden Age, a concept of a world of communal bliss and harmony without the institution of private property. Plato, in his Republic, outlined a society with communal holding of property; his concept of a hierarchical social system including slavery has by some been called "aristocratic communism". The Neoplatonists revived the idea of common property, which was also strong in some religious groups such as the Jewish Essenes and certain early Christian communities.

These opponents of private property held that property holding was evil and irreligious and that God had created the world for the use of all humanity. The first of these ideas was particularly strong among Manichaean and Gnostic heretics, such as the Cathari, but these concepts were also found in some orthodox Christian groups (e. g. , the Franciscans). " (2) Here we see quite clearly there has been a yearning for a society with a strong sense of community from the beginning of civilisation, while we can infer that its roots probably reach into pre-history from the numerous anthropological studies describing the communal living arrangements of primitive peoples across the <https://assignbuster.com/from-each-according-to-his-ability-to-each-according-to-his-needs-essay/>

world. There is a Darwinian explanation for this in that communal effort gives individuals the best chance of survival, but this direct link breaks down when the issue is not survival but how to best exploit natural resources and divide the fruits of labour.

Richard Dawkins captured the argument in his influential book “ The Selfish Gene”, in which he expresses his belief that the foundation of life as we know it is not the individual, not the group or society, not even ideas or culture, but rather the genes that are the basic building blocks of us all. He posits that genes are only interested in propogating themselves and so people are naturally selfish as it gives them an evolutionary advantage. However, he also notes the following. “ There are special circumstances in which a gene can achieve its own selfish goals best by fostering a limited form of altruism at the level of individual animals.

Special’ and ‘ limited’ are important words in the last sentence. Much as we might wish to believe otherwise, universal love and the welfare of the species as a whole are concepts that simply do not make evolutionary sense. ” (3) Dawkins gives an unnessarily pessimistic view of human nature here by choosing a definition of altruism where helping someone must come at one’s own expense. The beneficial results of communal action mean that win/win scenarios are possible, but these can only come about if the individual receiving aid provides a return at some later date. The relevance here is that “ from each according to their ability, to each according to his needs” could be said, by me at least, to have an evolutionary basis in that it promises the maximisation of return from communal action, which, if we accept the above arguments, is itself behaviour that has been formed through evolution.
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This is an important point as the current consensus is that conventional capitalism, with personal motivation provided through the profit motive and “survival of the fittest” embodied in competition, is the only economic theory that is based on natural principles of evolution. We are now at the point where it should be said that “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need”, is not really a political message at all, it is an economic one. Essentially, what it saying, or rather demanding, is that an economic system be contrived in the most efficient way - with individuals being provided with what they need to live and society getting the benefit of their talent. Read thus, it is a purely mechanical statement of an obvious desired outcome, with plenty of room for individualism in both work and reward (after all, one man’s ability to work is very different to another, as are their corresponding needs), and social justice becomes just a by-product of an efficient economic system. Marx actually obscured the fact that this is an economic slogan by appropriating it for his own brand of politics, communism. The appreciation of this is also obscured by the essay question given.

The exact quote from Karl Marx’s Critique of the Gotha Programme is “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs”. This is much more of a political statement, as it implies the individual should give all of his abilities to the greater good, rather than just enough to satisfy his needs, which is an option left open when only the one ability is required. Marx’s actual words are a call for individuals to join the struggle and, I believe, were written as such. I would be very surprised if Marx did not realise the power

that lies in an effective phrase, or slogan if we must call it that, and did not tweak it for maximum effect.

After all, his only contribution was, in fact, to tweak an already well known saying to fit into his beliefs. Its actual origins lie in socialism and in particular the Saint-Simonian doctrine where the message is given as “to each according to his ability; to each ability according to its fruits” (4). This message is one that is instantly recognisable nowadays, the only difference being that it has been appropriated once again, this time by liberal capitalism. The failure of communist states (even though they never got close to realising communism) combined with the relative riches and generous welfare provision of the leading capitalist nations means the prevailing opinion is that capitalism is the best economic vehicle to achieve such ends.

The question is, would the French utopian socialist Henri de Rouvroy, Comte de Saint-Simon, who is accredited with the saying, actually have disagreed. I, along with many Marxists, would argue probably not. For a start, he was writing at a time when inherited privilege and the control of land (the resources of production, as it were) were the great political battleground. Saint-Simon was basically arguing that those who worked the land had the right to keep its fruits. By the time Marx was writing, industrial capitalism had taken off and the bourgeois was coming into its own as the dominant class. Now the fight had switched to gaining equitable distribution of the fruits garnered from the means of production.

In short, different times produce different needs and different answers to different problems. The implication of the Saint-Simonian saying is that individuals will be properly rewarded for their individual work. The only way to gain these “fruits” is to have some form of unit of exchange, which points towards a monetary economy, rather than a collectivised system where needs are catered for universally. Terrell Carver makes the point when looking at Marxism from a postmodern angle. “If socialists intend to accept the monetary economy, however cooperativised and democratised, then they had better come clean as social democrats and welfare liberals.

At least that way they could perhaps start to build effective political alliances – and so slough off the analytical and historical burdens of twentieth-century socialism.” (5) His view that socialism is not possible within a market based system is not matched by many within the movement itself. In fact, the collapse of communism and the realities of the global market have made many socialists reevaluate how a juster society can be achieved. David Miller summed up the change in opinion by saying: “The values I shall appeal to in defence of markets are welfare, freedom and democracy. (6) This is quite a turnaround from the old methods of socialism where the state had a strong role to play both as a producer (through nationalised industries) and mediator (via collective bargaining). There are a number of reasons for this change in methodology, some economic, some political and some social.

Working backwards, the biggest change is that modern capitalist states are now considered consumer societies, rather than being purely class based industrial economies. Everyone is a consumer and all benefit from lower prices for goods and services. This quiet revolution means that every citizen

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now has a duality of interest, both as worker and consumer. The left has had to come terms with this changing of the ground rules, which was sketched out with a heavy heart by J.

K. Galbraith in an essay revisiting the themes of *The Affluent Society* at the start of the fourth edition of the book. He noted that that he had not foreseen the fact that an affluent society would, by its nature, be a more conservative society and that the left which “ led in the designs for modern security and affluence were arranging their own political demise” (7). This new political reality is what has concentrated the minds of the left, far more so than the ability of international capital to flee from countries practising progressive policies. A greater understanding of economics has also brought about a change in attitudes, in particular the realisation that state-run industries and public services create large bureaucracies that develop “ dysfunctions” – tendencies towards inefficiencies (8). This viewpoint is easily proved from an economic perspective by simply comparing the cost of a given good or service from the private sector to a similar one produced in the public sector, although it should be added that lower wages and worse conditions can make up a sizeable part of this difference.

The field of sociology has helped explain why this difference might exist, with major contributions coming from the study of bureaucracy (the Weber-social action strand) and the study of group behaviour (the Durkheim-systems strand). To sum up in intuitive terms, the natural inclination of bureaucracy is to create more bureaucracy and the natural tendency of any given group is to protect itself, thereby leading to “ producer interests” taking priority, rather than the needs of the citizens/consumers to whom the group is meant

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to be delivering a service/product. The left know that they are advocating taking more money in taxes from the public as a whole in order to provide services and redistribute wealth. For them to do so and be politically viable, they must attempt to provide a guarantee to the voting public that the money is being well spent. In other words, the new watchwords are efficiency and the ability to change in the name of efficiency. If these are the criteria, then free markets, with their (if somewhat imperfect) ability to change to consumer demand, are an obvious answer.

Once free markets have been accepted as something beneficial then the political thought that is associated with economics will also change. To summarise that change, the principles of pluralism have triumphed in the political arena and have replicated that victory in the field of economics. The new orthodoxy is that producer interests can be just as big a drag on society as inequitable ownership arrangements and that the state is not normally the best institution to have direct control over large organisations or large sectors of the economy. The new breed of socialists advocate a balanced model, which accepts that private enterprise is the lifeblood of society but that it must adapt to the demands of the people which, ultimately, it serves.

As Julian Le Grand and Saul Estrin put it succinctly: " What is needed is a model of society where power is more evenly distributed between....

roups; where the interests of owners of capital, of workers, and of consumers are all taken into account with none taking automatic priority. " (9) Note the change in thought processes over time that the quote represents. Previously, socialist thought was founded on " scientific" principles that had a common

basis with the prevailing view that rationality would provide an answer to all problems, if only the “one best way” to organise matters could be found, to quote, surprisingly, Frederick Taylor, the founder of “scientific management”. What has changed is that today there is an acceptance that only the individual can adequately describe what the “one best way” is for them. Old social classes have become blurred and there is no longer a group identity that can be catered for, instead policies must be tailored to the individual, with a plurality of options available to account for different tastes, lifestyles, ages, ambitions, even hopes and dreams. The very fact that this is the new battleground is testament to the impact that socialist thought has had on society.

Using a definition of absolute poverty, the “needs” of people are adequately catered for in liberal capitalist democracies, with social provision guaranteeing citizens housing, schooling, health services, clean water and sanitation, as well as an income to buy basic necessities. The fact that one half of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need” has been met means it is only natural that the left should turn its attention to the first part of the saying. After all, that is the work that still lies undone. From this perspective, turning our attention solely to the United Kingdom, New Labour can be seen as an evolution, rather than a revolution, in socialist thinking.

The problem is, of course, that the party itself can't quite come out in public and say so just yet. Communism might be on its last legs as an ideology but its “spectre” still haunts political life, with the name of socialism still

suffering by association. If socialist thought is to reinvent itself as a realistic
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alternative to consumer capitalism once again, the first step is for socialists to reclaim the old saying “ from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” and prove to the wider public that it still has relevance and utility even in modern times. Who could argue, after all, with a formula for an efficient society. To finish, I give an example of how the old saying is still having a profound influence on politics in Britain today.

All that’s lacking, in fact, is for the politician concerned to specifically articulate it. Go on Gordon, don’t be shy, say what you mean, I dare you. Gordon Brown, current Chancellor of the Exchequer - “ Our distinctive argument is that the strength of society is essential not only to tackle all entrenched interests and accumulation of power that hold people back, but also positively to intervene to promote the realisation of potential. One hundred years ago this objective made action against poverty, slums and unemployment the first priority. No one could begin to realise his or her potential as long as she or he went without food, was badly housed or was denied work or income. Fifty years ago the route to achieving this objective involved setting a floor of rights to social security, employment, health care and educational opportunities.

Now in a global economy, where in industry, labour and skill are increasingly more important than capital, where in society, individual aspirations are rightly greater than ever, and where, as Anthony Giddens points out in this volume, just about everyone has become a decision maker in his or her own right, our view of what it means to realise potential has to be much more ambitious than ever before, and I would argue thus truer to the original vision of pioneering socialism. (10) Post script: Owing to the constraints of <https://assignbuster.com/from-each-according-to-his-ability-to-each-according-to-his-needs-essay/>

time and space, this essay has not attempted to factor in the iniquities of a global economic system that seems to sustain poverty in the developing world or environmental issues. It will have to suffice to say that “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” is a message that will gain in power over time. The “dismal” science of economics can only offer the prognosis that those in the rich world will have to reduce their “needs” to consume a disproportionate amount of the world’s resources, both as an environmental measure and to ensure that those in poverty have the “ability” to live a life a life worth living. What other “political slogan” will capture the argument and at the same time offer some sort of solution?