Preface

The collapse of socialism as actualized in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s led to a triumphalist declaration of the end of history, the forces of economic freedom (capitalism and democracy) having vanquished the forces of evil that were intent on overthrowing capitalism and replacing it with socialism. Socialism in this context was generally understood as the abolition of private property and state-led control over the forces of production and the distribution of the social product in the public interest. As for capitalism, at the time it was advanced and took the form of neoliberal globalization—structural adjustment to the dictates of capital and the new world order, a system in which the forces of economic freedom (competitive individualism, greed, private capital, the free market) were liberated from the regulatory constraints of the welfare development state. From this perspective and these optics, the defeat of socialism was seen as the superiority of free market capitalism over both state-led or regulated capitalism and socialist development, giving free reign to the quest for maximum private profit.

Fast forward to the future in the present: a system in crisis, a growing polarization of society between the rich and powerful and the poor and powerless, and a yawning social and development divide that has given rise in diverse contexts to an urgent political question: barbarism or socialism? It was Rosa Luxemburg who first famously confronted and formulated this question in conditions of free market capitalist development close to a hundred years ago in the second decade of the twentieth century, on the eve of the Russian Revolution.

In October 2009, a group of socialists concerned with how possibly or best to confront this dilemma in the conditions of a new millennium met in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to consider how best or possibly respond to the challenge of combatting the barbarism of capitalist development today. The agenda of this meeting was to consider and debate how socialists all over the world can contribute to the process of rebuilding socialism—to move towards the socialism of the twenty-first century. At issue in the resulting discussions was not only the meaning of socialism and the form taken by socialism in the twentieth century, but also the different forms of socialist politics—and the thinking behind it: Marxism itself, or the way that Marxism was understood and acted upon. This volume is a product of these discussions and subsequent reflections. It is published as a modest contribution to an emerging debate.

James Petras sets the stage and defines some of the terms of this debate in an introductory essay on twentieth-century socialism and a brief review of several political projects in Latin America to bring about or concerned
with the socialism of the twenty-first century. In the concluding essay Petras and Henry Veltmeyer reflect on the fundamental problematic of our times: barbarism or socialism? At issue, as they see it, is whether the forces of change generated in conditions of a multidimensional systemic crisis, and discussed by the other contributors to this volume, are organized and mobilized by the Left or the Right. The world, they add, is at the crossroads of substantive social change. The question is: will it result in a new form of socialism or in a new form of capitalism? The answer to this question is by no means evident, but it does mean a critical re-examination of socialist thought and practice and, at the very least, some action on the ideas advanced by the contributors to this volume.

Reinventing Socialism

Mike Lebowitz, in Chapter 2, addresses the problem identified by Petras and Veltmeyer (of barbarism or socialism?) in an essay that problematizes both traditional Marxist thought and socialism practice, and the need to both “reinvent socialism” and to “recover Marx,” a theme picked up on by Hugo Radice in Chapter 9. Subsequent essays in this section reflect on different problems involved in Marxist thought and twentieth-century socialist practice—and in rebuilding socialism in the current conjuncture of capitalist development. Errol Sharpe in this connection argues that socialists should re-examine their fundamental received ideas about socialism as well as the political practice related to these ideas. Socialists, he argues, should break the self-imposed habit of so many socialist intellectuals to “cloister criticism” of socialist practice and to break away from self-imposed bonds on socialist thought and practice. Thom Workman in the same connection reconstructs the ideological broadsides directed against Marxism from the ideological ramparts of “modernisms.” From the perspective of this attack on Marx and Marxism, and thus socialism, the project of reinventing socialism hinges on a “recovery of Marx” from the weight of an ideology designed to bury Marx and infect Marxism with counter-productive ideas in a ideological struggle to undermine the search for a genuine socialist alternative to capitalism.

Organization and Strategy

The project of reinventing or building socialism in part is a matter of understanding better the forces at play, and, as Hugo Radice argues, to revisit concepts of class and capital, and rethink the form that socialism might and should take—to reimagine the socialist project. But of equal importance in the project of rebuilding socialism is the question of how best to organize and mobilize the forces of social transformation, a matter of organization and political strategy so as to determine, as Lenin had it, “what needs to be done.” In the legacy of Marxist-Leninist thought, twentieth-century socialist practice
by and large was based on the agency and use of the communist or socialist party as a political instrument for socialist transformation. Marta Harnecker in one context (developments in Latin America), and Mario Casadio and Luciano Vasapollo in another (Italy), problematize the political party as an instrument of socialist transformation (or at least in its Marxist-Leninist traditional form), posing the problem of socialist transformation as a matter of “people’s power,” which more often than not in diverse contexts has been manifest in the organizational form of a social movement rather than a political party. In her reflections on this problematic—spontaneity vs. organization? the political party vs. a social movement? the state as an agency of socialist transformation?—Harnecker advances a series of propositions that socialists might use as points of reference to inform their political practice. Casadio and Vasapollo complement this analysis with several reflections and lessons drawn from the organizational experience of their Communist Network. The focus of these reflections is on the instrumentality and organizational form of the political party and a network-based social movement rather than the state. On the state as an instrument of socialist transformation—another critical issue of socialist thought and practice—the essay by Jeffery Webber is particularly relevant. As for Murray Smith and Josh Dumont, they locate the issue of how to organize for socialist transformation in the context of adverse debates on this question within the socialist movement in the twentieth century. The reflections and arguments advanced in these three essays constitute a useful repertoire of ideas in the project of rebuilding socialism in the twenty-first century.

**Prospects and Limitations**

In his contribution to the debate on how to bring about socialism in the changed conditions of the twenty-first-century ideology Hugo Radice argues that the mistakes in socialist practice made in the twentieth century hinge on a misapprehension by socialists of the fundamental dynamics of capitalism, or Marx’s understanding of it. In a critique of twentieth-century socialism, i.e., of the ways in which the goal of building a socialist society was pursued, he points towards the need to re-examine alternative forms of socialist politics submerged by the dominant forces of social democracy and communism.

William Carroll in his chapter argues that humanity’s prospects in the twenty-first century hinge on the creation of a counter-hegemonic historical bloc within which practices and social visions capable of fashioning a postcapitalist economic democracy begin to flourish. The organic crisis of neoliberal capitalism creates openings for such a breakthrough; the deepening ecological crisis renders such a breakthrough an urgent necessity. The analytical challenge pursued here is to discern, in the contemporary conjuncture, elements of practice that might weld the present to an alternative future.
How can new movement practices and sensibilities be pulled into a historical bloc—an ensemble of social relations and human agency for democratic socialism? How might that bloc move on the terrain of civil society, and vis-à-vis states, opening spaces for practices that prefigure a postcapitalist world? The aim of the chapter is to show how a Gramscian problematic furnishes us with an analytical and strategic lens that can illuminate practical answers.

Jeffrey Webber for his contribution to the debate reviews in some detail Hugo Chávez’s project of a Bolivarian revolution and the ongoing efforts to bring about the socialism of the twenty-first century in Venezuela. This is at the moment the most important, if not only serious, worldwide effort and experiment designed explicitly to bring about the socialism of the twenty-first century. The close analysis that Webber provides of the forces at play in this process, and an assessment of the prospects for bringing about socialism in the conditions generated by these forces, makes an important contribution to our understanding and the project of reinventing and rebuilding socialism in the twenty-first century.