Synthesizing Socialism and Capitalism

Perhaps the most salient ideological conflict of the twentieth century, both within the United States and globally, has pitted a dominant mode of economic relationships called capitalism against various alternatives including socialism and communism which, at least in the view of their adherents, have sought to eradicate the injustices, oppressions, inequalities, and regimes of exploitation that have come to define the prevailing system. On a geopolitical scale, after the success of the Bolshevik Revolution had proved that there were viable alternatives to the capitalist order that could be applied at the level of the nation-state, the conflict would eventually play out as the Cold War, with the US and the Soviet Union as the major international antagonists, despite having been allies in the fight against fascism.

Over the course of the half-century period considered in this book, roughly 1918 to 1968, the clash of capitalism and its alternatives has been, of course, not merely a geopolitical matter, but a fundamental characteristic of intranational politics. Before their descent into fascism, the new republics that arose in Central Europe after World War I would provide real-world laboratories for socialist or social-democratic alternatives. The Austro-Marxists and Social Democrats who held sway in the early years of the First Austrian Republic, and especially in Vienna, presented a “third way” of socialist politics that was heavily invested in social engineering but, at the same time, rejected the political revolution, radical social inversion, and authoritarianism that would come to define communism. It was, in some sense, a practical execution of what James Kloppenberg, alluding to the philosophy of John Dewey, has called the via media in the political philosophy of American and European thinkers that arose in the late-
nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, which had a political corollary in progressivism and in movements for social democracy.¹

To the extent that this book has considered capitalism and socialism as state-managed economic systems with cultural corollaries, a major contention has been that these systems are neither absolute nor mutually exclusive, despite the stark distinctions drawn out by the fierce rhetoric of partisans. The experience of the three main protagonists in this narrative—Paul Lazarsfeld, Victor Gruen, and László Moholy-Nagy—is, of course, biographical and anecdotal, and cannot be the basis for definitive conclusions about anything as all-encompassing as economic structures or global politics. At the same time, however, an examination of these three contemporaneous cases over the period of their productive careers provides a window into grand ideologies as they played out vis-à-vis actual historical practice. By looking at these biographical narratives, one may consider the extent to which ideologies may capture some sense of reality or, on the contrary, exist mainly in the world of pure ideas relative to the messiness of the human experience. In many ways, the contradictions, exceptions, and qualifications that arise upon close examination of any particular case are precisely what is interesting and important about history. The advantage of considering the stories of three émigrés as part of a broader examination of ideas is that they provide narratives of individual lives which nevertheless transcended temporal, political, and cultural contexts and exist as nodes within complex political and ideological networks. Although the facts of the historical record must be judged against the proclamations of the protagonists, invariably these professional biographies present ironies that call attention to the gap between ideology and reality.

Moholy, Lazarsfeld, and Gruen were all deeply involved in the socialist movement in their youth, which was a central part of their political awakening and coming of age. Their attachment to the movement was partly based in the social context they found themselves in, coming from middle-class families and having found their identities in the largely socialist milieus of intellectuals, artists, and bohemians of Vienna and Budapest. The trauma of the First World War—which would leave Moholy maimed from battle and would begin a period of fatherless poverty for Gruen—was formative not only for the political and material void it would leave after the fall of the Habsburg Empire, but for the paternal absence that it would make ever more apparent. Moholy’s father had never been present in his life, and while Lazarsfeld had come from a stable family, he appears to have sought a more assertive father-figure in Friedrich Adler,

who had virtually replaced his relatively apolitical father for a time while he was at the front during the war. But with absence and uncertainty comes possibility, and the new postwar republics offered unprecedented potential for something better. Despite their hardships, Moholy, Lazarsfeld, and Gruen would never retreat into despair or disillusionment; instead, they would approach uncertainty with openness and optimism. It was not out of class hatred or a need for the security of dogma that they were drawn to socialism, but for its role as a force for progressive change in a world that was begging to be remade.

Being a socialist was virtually a natural aspect of life given the social worlds these young men occupied in Vienna and Budapest. Both Gruen and Lazarsfeld participated in the “Jahoda-Kreis,” the circle of intellectuals and musicians that gathered at the family home of Marie Jahoda, who would become Lazarsfeld’s first wife and later the director of the Forschungsstelle. Lazarsfeld, Jahoda, and Hans Zeisel would move almost seamlessly from their involvement in the socialist youth movement to their roles as social researchers and innovators of survey research techniques with studies such as Marienthal. The center of Gruen’s social life was the socialist Political Cabaret and later the Kleinkunstbühnen during the period of Austrian proto-fascism. These leftist theater troupes would carry over to America after Gruen’s immigration, where they were reborn as the Refugee Artists Group. For Moholy, the Hungarian Activist movement centered around the socialist artist Lajos Kassák and the contributors to the Ma journal would provide social currency in the art scenes of Budapest, Vienna, and Berlin. The movement also proudly asserted that art was not a decadent, bourgeois privilege but an important element in the movement for socialism. To be a part of these intellectual and artistic communities was to be a socialist.

There was, of course, considerable overlap between the socialist and Jewish communities, though for Moholy, Lazarsfeld, and Gruen, their Jewish identity was not so much positively embraced as it was a fact of life that could serve as a serious impediment to social and professional advancement in their home countries. However, that very impediment could create other opportunities. For Lazarsfeld, being Jewish meant that he could not hope to become a professor at the University as he might have done, and so instead he would found the Forschungsstelle. This alternative academic route would establish him as an innovative social researcher and lend him the requisite qualifications for his Rockefeller fellowship to the US. Lazarsfeld would, of course, go on to establish new research centers in the US that would once again provide jobs for displaced socialists and exiled Jewish researchers. Gruen’s Jewish identity would be the cause of childhood bullying and his forced emigration after the Anschluss, but the community of Jewish refugees in New York would provide him with opportunities
to advance his career as a designer of storefronts. Although Moholy never really acknowledged his Jewish heritage, it was almost certainly a relevant fact—along with his association with the Bauhaus, tarred as a haven of “cultural bolshevism”—in his decision to flee Nazi Germany. But again, the community of exiles he joined in London would serve as a launching pad for his career there and ultimately in the US.

The nimbleness with which these figures adapted to radically new circumstances in unfamiliar cities and countries was reflected in their nondogmatic, pragmatic approach to socialism and social democracy. Social democracy was, for them, more of a disposition to solving problems than a fixed program with predetermined outcomes.

Lazarsfeld, for example, was certainly a socialist, but he was intellectually promiscuous and open-minded about any available suite of ideas that might be useful to him—from psychoanalysis to logical empiricism—as he investigated the mysteries of human choice, decision, and motivation. The very nature of Roosevelt’s New Deal, which created an array of social programs to tackle a mammoth problem, the Great Depression, was entirely in line with Lazarsfeld’s approach to social research, which developed methodologies through constant trial and error. When it came to commercial market research, Lazarsfeld was not bothered by who the client was because the goal was to solve a problem or produce a research finding by whatever means were available. Lazarsfeld’s colleagues Robert Lynd and C. Wright Mills were predisposed to wariness about commercial clients, but such strict limitations would ultimately discard research into the lives of ordinary people, which ought to have been the concern of any good social democrat. If Lazarsfeld had followed the Frankfurt School critical theorist Theodor Adorno’s aversion to doing research for a major broadcaster such as NBC or CBS, for example, scholarship on the effects of mass communication would have been poorer for it.

The Gemeindebauten of Vienna were designed not only to fulfill a desperate need for housing, but also to perform an ideological function in the creation of the “new people” for the socialist future; yet many elements of that building form—including the Hof-Haus design around a central courtyard—would prove adaptable to a similar function in a very different context as the American shopping center. The shopping center remained a community center, even if its central function was commerce. What Gruen recognized better than many Americans, who might have been intellectually hobbled by an ideology of “rugged individualism,” was that planning was the means by which major projects were undertaken, and the result of the project was not necessarily corrupted by the identity of the patron.
The whole method of the Bauhaus, which was so fundamental to Moholy’s worldview and approach to teaching, emphasized that open-mindedness and experimentation—as opposed to strictly following a prescribed formula—were essential to innovative solutions to design problems. Such problems were abundant in the commercial world, and, for that reason, Moholy was more than happy to take them on, either as an individual contractor or as a representative of a design school such as the New Bauhaus or its later iterations. Bringing together art and industry in the interest of mass production and ultimately for mass consumption was a fundamental Bauhaus principle. Though the commercial aspects of such a disposition toward industrial design might trouble a fine artist or a critic such as the *New York Times* writer who felt that Moholy’s “purest painting” had been done in the 1920s when his political idealism was “strongest,” Moholy himself felt no betrayal to the cause of social democracy for having done commercial projects at the Bauhaus and elsewhere. When the Second World War came, and Moholy found himself in the US on the side of democracy and against fascism, his design school aided the effort by training experts in camouflage and creating useful products with unconventional materials due to wartime rationing—such as wooden bedsprings.

A willingness to take on any project that interested them allowed Lazarsfeld, Gruen, and Moholy to tackle problems that stimulated their creativity and would lead them to produce innovations in methodology and design. Marketers wanted to understand motivations in consumer decisions, for example, and Lazarsfeld well understood that the study of buying decisions could easily be applied to any decision-making scenario: “Such is the origin of my Vienna market research studies: the result of the methodological equivalence of socialist voting and the buying of soap.” Techniques such as the focused interview, reason analysis, and the panel technique have become standard methods of social research; that they were developed in the context of commercial studies is immaterial to their use-value in the pursuit of knowledge about human behavior. Similarly, Lazarsfeld’s radio research—and that of his colleagues such as Herta Herzog—would produce valuable insight into the lives of ordinary people who would not otherwise have been the subjects of major research studies. As part of the mission of Lazarsfeld’s research bureaus, research findings with general applicability would not be the proprietary information of the client but would be made available to other scholars and to the general public. Gruen’s work designing storefronts gave him insight into consumer psychology, which he would later apply to his shopping center designs. The aim was not to entrap and manip-

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ulate consumers, as some critics have suggested; rather, the design was done in the interest of making the experience of shopping more pleasurable for shoppers. Though the ideals of Gruen’s original conception have been somewhat lost, the shopping center was designed to create a pleasant, walkable urban space, a value that has only become more urgent since Gruen first put it forward in the 1940s.

The projects taken on by Gruen, Moholy, and Lazarsfeld often led to significant and lasting relationships with the officers and executives running the foundations, corporations, and institutions that financed them. The Rockefeller Foundation officer John Marshall, for example, had an interest in the social effects of radio in an age of rising dictatorships; that interest would translate into a long-term commitment to Lazarsfeld’s research through the Rockefeller-sponsored Office of Radio Research. Moholy’s friendship with Walter Paepcke was, in many ways, reminiscent of the classic patron-artist relationship. However, Paepcke did not generally commission works as such. Instead, he provided the financing, business acumen, and commercial connections to realize grand projects that visionaries like Moholy would not have been able to execute under any other arrangement. Paepcke also served to interpret Moholy’s unorthodox methods to perplexed businessmen who might not have otherwise lent their support. The president of Detroit’s Hudson’s department store, Oscar Webber, served a similar role for Victor Gruen, allowing him to carry out his vision for the shopping center. In both the case of Paepcke and of Webber, flattery, friendship, and financing were mixed to the point of being indistinguishable, but for each party involved the final product or project was what mattered. The automobile-free pedestrian zones of many cities, including Gruen’s native city of Vienna, owe something to the relationship of Gruen and Webber, which led to the car-free ideal of the shopping center, a concept that would later be transposed to downtowns.

Ultimately, as creators and leaders of institutions, and as teachers and writers, the influence of Gruen, Moholy, and Lazarsfeld went well beyond the projects they completed or the methods or techniques they devised. On the recommendation of Walter Gropius, Moholy carried on the tradition of the Bauhaus in the US with the New Bauhaus, School of Design, and Institute of Design, which exists to this day as part of the Illinois Institute of Technology. Lazarsfeld led the Office of Radio Research and the Bureau of Applied Social Research, among other research centers, which became models for incorporating the methods of social research in the collective work of researchers. Gruen’s architectural firm, Victor Gruen Associates (now Gruen Associates), exists today. As with any institution, the vision of the founder may fade over time, as has been
the case with the Institute of Design discussed in Chapter 12. Still, these institutions serve as testaments to the enduring value of realizing socialist ideas and methods in projects that serve human ends, even in the context of free-market, consumer capitalism where the quest for profits often overshadows the ultimate purpose. “It is a generally accepted premise that capitalism with its industrial technology has to serve in the most economical way for the realization of profit,” Moholy wrote in the final statement of his pedagogical philosophy, *Vision in Motion*. “However, the ‘economical’ should be subordinated to human requirements to make technology a benefit instead of a curse.”
