

SOVIET SOCIALISM

by

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UNTIL RECENTLY the word Socialism has been used to stand for many things—a set of ideas about an egalitarian society which some people who called themselves Socialists were striving to bring into being, the expression of the aspirations of these people, the historical outcome of economic necessity at some future date, visions of a society in which the wastage and frustrations of Capitalism with its ethical and moral contradictions will have vanished, of a society in which human endeavour is planned and directed to the common good. While some have used the term for what they visualise as the final outcome of a rationally organised society, others have seen it as the intermediate step towards a Communist stage. Socialists have differed regarding which aspect of this composite medley of ideas they would regard as the prime mover, which if pressed forward would drag the rest in its train and therefore they have differed on the political and industrial means necessary — and desirable — to speed this "Socialism" into being. Apart from a few abortive attempts of passing interest and of a Utopian nature, not until the Soviet Union came into being could it be contended that a form of society had at last been established to which the word **Socialist** could seriously be attached. This is in fact the claim of the Soviet Government, and it is a claim that has been underwritten by practically all the Communist Parties throughout the world.

The claim is unique in many respects. Every objective onlooker, whether sympathetic to Socialist ideas or not, has to admit that the Soviet Union which makes this claim has established itself securely and firmly in spite of nearly forty years of active hostility from all capitalist countries. They cannot but admit that in certain vital respects a new kind of society has come into being, impelled forward by an almost irresistible motive force, equipping itself with modern techniques, and rapidly transforming its population from a near-Feudal, primitive capitalist stage to one in which modern scientists and technologists are being created at a greater pace than that of the whole of the rest of the world. They have to agree that the raw materials of the vast area it covers no longer rests in private hands, to be sold or exported for private profit, and that the labour power of Soviet workers is no longer bought and sold on the market like commodities as in a Capitalist country.

Even the bitterest opponent of the Soviet Union within the socialist camp — and there are many, as we know — would at once admit that all this must correspond to far-reaching changes in the way of life and in human relationships. Moreover, however critical such opponents may be of detailed aspects of Soviet policy, they would agree that the vast changes that are overtaking Asia, in China, India, Indo-China, Afghanistan, etc., owe much, at least in material help, to the Soviet Union, although the internal modes of development in these countries differ very much indeed from that of the Soviet Union.

Many may not like it that the word Socialism, with all the ethical and emotional atmosphere that has historically enveloped it, is attached to the Soviet economy. That is of little consequence. There is no other physical situation to which the word can be applied, nor have they any other word for it. Present-day Soviet society is actually the objective entity to which the word is being attached, and that has to be accepted, although objectors would be entitled to say that it is not Socialism in general that is so being named but **Soviet Socialism**. This would imply that if a corresponding change in ownership of natural resources and of the means of production were achieved elsewhere, while there would be points of similarity with Socialism in the Soviet Union there would also be significant points of difference. It seems obvious for example, that when the Chinese Republic, like the U.S.S.R. claims to be Socialist, its Socialism will differ in many respects from the Soviet variety. So it is perhaps more accurate to refer to **Soviet Socialism** at this stage. Moreover the programme of political action in each area, out of which the specific form of Socialism would emerge, would vary with the history, traditions and institutional forms already set up in that area. Thus for this country such a programme should perhaps be called "The British Road to British Socialism."

Now all this may seem, a fuss about words, but it is not. It lies much deeper. An understanding of what lies behind this made me sit up sharply during my recent visit to the Soviet Union, when one of the leading lights remarked during discussion — as if it were a matter of obvious fact — "Of course, we have long passed the stage of bourgeois Capitalist Democracy." The fallacy in the statement and the shallowness of the thought behind it shook me. Here was a society which, scarcely 40 years ago, had taken the first revolutionary step along the Russian Road to Soviet Socialism. Western Capitalism had evolved, not without its own localised struggles, from Feudalism through Merchant, Industrial, and Finance Capitalism to Imperialism whether of the British, French or American type. Classes had struggled and heads had rolled. At each stage the battle had been fought both on the economic and on the ideological plane. At each stage freedoms had been won, and freedoms lost, and out of it all had emerged

the institutions of Bourgeois Capitalist Democracy, which enshrined the rights that had already been won, and pointed the heights that had still to be scaled. The Soviet upsurge was revolutionary in two senses. On the one hand it swept away the feudal semi-capitalist basis of Czarism; but unlike the English Revolution or the French Revolution, it did not proceed to inaugurate the next phase of Capitalism. It sought at one step to utilise the whole inheritance of Western Science and Technology in order to usher in a Socialist society, already within the perspective of advanced thinkers who had experienced, understood, and analysed, by Marxist methods, the changing forms and the forces of progress and reaction within Capitalism itself. This was the revolutionary Leninist content of the Russian Revolution. It was not simply an orthodox revolution to overthrow a dominant class and to substitute another in its place, but one which set itself the task of inaugurating a classless society. It was not merely a blind upsurge against immediate injustice, but a consciously planned attempt to fashion history on the basis of the fullest understanding of the material world, of society and its ideological superstructure. The route it was to follow would be distinctive and unique. It had never and could never have been trodden before. In its forward drive from Czarist Feudalism to Socialism it would by-pass not only the various phases of Capitalism and Imperialism, but also those social institutions that embody, within capitalism, the hard-won rights of the workers conceded during their centuries of struggle. That route could not conceivably have a milestone engraved with the words "Bourgeois Capitalist Democracy." In such a situation even an institution called "Trade Unionism" would necessarily perform a function utterly different from that corresponding to Trade Unionism in Britain, France or the U.S.A.

If this leading Soviet light, then, was guilty of a marxist fallacy, guilty of a space-time anachronism in talking of their having passed the stage of Bourgeois Capitalist Democracy, so also are those from Capitalist Democracies who persistently demand for Soviet citizens what they regard as justice, freedom of expression and free elections, in the special sense in which these operate here. Justice is not an abstract concept capable of being transported mechanically from Kenya to Britain or vice versa, but a mode of living and an emotional response to a mode of living in a particular society. Many Nazis saw "justice" in the extermination of Jewry. Few Cypriots see "justice" in British "justice" in Cyprus. I met many Soviet workers who saw no "justice" in the "commodity" attitude to human labour in Britain. The peculiar history of the Soviet Union has been such as to build up a society with its own set of values, its own concepts of what is right or wrong, its own specific "freedoms" and therefore its own special methods of struggling to achieve these. It has its own modes of self-expression;

its individuals have their aspirations within the framework of their own society, their own irritations and frustrations and their own methods of coping with these. In very vital ways their and our societies differ.

This does not by any means imply that there are not enormous similarities. We both belong to the human race. We have similar urges and similar methods of satisfying these. We are human beings whose thinking is heavily conditioned by the same material world. In the Soviet Union they produce the same kind of scientific generalisations as we do here. What is cogent evidence to them on such matters is usually cogent evidence to us. The logical pattern of analysis we both make of the material world is roughly the same. Maxwell's Equations for electromagnetic action are the same there as here. We both experience values and exercise judgments that enable us to distinguish this as "right" and that as "wrong"—although "this" and "that" may be interchanged. We both value literature, art, music, science and knowledge generally, but the relative values attached to these values may be very different. So also therefore are the practical ways in which they are encouraged or thwarted.

All this may seem very trite and obvious, but it is important to underline it if we are to discuss in a rational way the meaning of the word Socialism, and to work out in a practical way a sensible approach to problems of co-existence. For in a world in which both camps possess Guided Missiles and Hydrogen Bombs, co-existence is the most urgent, the most immediate issue in international politics. If each sides regards its path through history as the only possible one compatible with its values, and sees the morals and values of the other as lower, or wrong or false or degenerate, then the groundwork is already prepared for a "justification" of world catastrophe. There is, I believe, a very excellent legal dictum in this country which says that if an individual suffers from an illusion, and commits a crime, then he must be judged on the assumption that his illusion is in fact true. So also with regard to our judgments vis-a-vis actions and values of a different society.

But the values of a society are not static. People live and learn. The physical world and the social milieu throw up problems which they must resolve. Yet every individual in that society is a unique being, in spite of his similarities with his neighbour. Such uniqueness implies a wide variety of reaction to similar situations, diversity of decision, conflict and adjustment, and out of this emerges deeper understanding of others and increased sensitivity of judgment. This interaction between unique beings within the common necessities of social life, forces into existence a changing pattern of values. And so it is that the experience of living in a society in which productive relations have undergone a drastic alteration, while ownership and control are no longer in the hands

of a special class, begins to act like a yeast. Old traditions, old values, old beliefs, hitherto unquestioned, have to be justified anew — or discarded; not at once, of course, for the yeast takes time to act, and its influence to penetrate into the deeper and more remote layers.

Accepting therefore that Soviet Socialism implies a well-established and securely founded economic structure, at what stage in this process will one be able to say that the new Socialist man has at last been born, that the values of the past carried forward in the minds, feelings, and habits, of the older generation from an old almost forgotten epoch, have at last been exorcised, so that the society is both economically and ideologically Socialistic? What is the time-lag between the full transformation of the economic structure of a society and its ideological superstructure? Only a mechanically-minded "marxist," a contradiction in terms, would imagine that a switch in the one implies an immediate switch in the other. To say that thinking is a reflection of the physical world in, the mind of the thinker is only a partial statement of a truth. Thinking is part of the reaction of an historically conditioned being to the physical world around him. At any moment he has to think with the brain and the feelings he has inherited, and with the matrix of so far unarticulated and unquestioned assumptions that are the residue of reflections of the past. If we have nothing to lose but our chains, these chains are also the mental and emotional fetters that bind us to the past, and until these also are thrown off we are only partially emancipated, even if the economic structure of our society has been rebuilt on a socialistic basis. During the latter years of Stalin's life, if his name was mentioned at a Party meeting, the members stood up in silent reverence for a minute. To brush this off by referring to it as the "Cult of the Individual," and to regard it as an intrusion from outside into a Socialist society is to miss its significance. It is the residue of the Occult not the cult from the past, within a society which already has an economically Socialistic basis. It is evidence of the gap between basis and superstructure. For leading members to have an outlook into which this form of behaviour can be naturally fitted, implies a society that is far removed from Socialistic coherence. The same thing is true about the existence of the "Beria Conspiracy/" the false charges that were levelled against honest cultural workers of Ukrainian, Armenian, and Jewish origin, and of their liquidation under torture. It is foolish to talk of these as "violations" of socialist morality, as if they were features necessarily foreign to a society that stems from Czarism, with all that this implies, and that had already become ideologically unified. They represented an aspect of Soviet life that had come out into the open. Soviet spokesmen are not in general marxist ignoramuses; what I have just written must be commonplace to them, as easily

seen and recognised as the scenery around them. When therefore they announce, in all seriousness and in all sincerity, that the Soviet Union has now completed the journey to Socialism and has at last set its foot securely on the highroad to Communism, are they referring only to the economic structure of the society? When this pronouncement was first made during Stalin's lifetime, there were many people in prison on false charges, a brutal security service was carrying through activities, which, when we in bourgeois Capitalist Democracy heard of them, shook us to our depths. They must therefore have felt, as Soviet spokesmen, that these things were not important, or that they were an inevitable aspect of the revolutionary struggle. I personally cannot accept the view, which I found prevalent among leading Soviet theoreticians, that these were aberrations or deviations from "the true path of Socialism" — that they had "nothing to do with Socialism," for this leads immediately to complete verbal confusion. Socialism is the word we have decided to use to describe the existing situation in the Soviet Union. There is no other objective referent. Behind their attitude, in fact, lies a piece of pure Idealism, that would have made Marx, Engels and Lenin turn in their graves. For those who presented this viewpoint — and they were people in leading positions — evidently had in their minds a mental image to which they were also attaching the word Socialism, two referents for the word — a disembodied image and *part* of an objective social situation. That part of the latter which was inconsistent with this image, was not to be regarded as socialism and therefore did not belong to this society. It was an aberration, an intrusion from outside, a deviation. To divide a unified process sharply into "truth" and "error" is one of the most elementary fallacies in scientific methodology. It is like saying that every triangle you care to draw with pencil on paper, consisting, of course, of real particles of black material on an uneven surface, has an element of falseness or error in it because it differs from the real or true triangle which exists in the mind. The fact is that all these triangles are quite real and what is in the mind is an idea or an abstraction drawn from them.

I am not trying to be a purest in this matter. I am merely trying to disentangle the various elements present in Soviet Socialism, and trying to suggest that those elements present in it, which we of the Left in bourgeois capitalist society have found particularly abhorrent, are intimately linked with the special route followed from Czarist society to Soviet Economic Socialism. But there is of course a real sense in which it can be said that the capitalist world outside did play a causal role in this matter. Given that the revolutionary struggle had to be carried through, this has had to be done in a violently hostile world — a world that has imposed on the Soviet Union a Cold War that has lasted for 40 years,

flaring up at one stage into a scorching furnace that seared masses of human beings, and wiped out the product of their creative energy. These were experiences imposed with ruthless inhumanity from without, that could leave little room for the indulgence of fine feelings and finer distinctions. Ruthlessness in attack could be met only by ruthlessness in defence, and to suggest otherwise merely adds fuel to the Cold War. We have not been subjected to that scorching test, and so it would be Pharasaical on our part to condemn.

But it would be equally false to allow our understanding of how this situation arose to mute our abhorrence. For horror was undoubtedly the first natural reaction of every balanced person on the Left, at the publicly disclosed Kruschov revelations. To me personally it was both horror and dismay, and later confirmation of the detailed accuracy of these events during my recent visit, was almost too painful to discuss with my colleagues. But they have to be faced; and they have to be fitted into the history of the struggle for Socialism; and anyone who refuses to do so is no Marxist. I have been told many times with some heat, that the publication of the report of the delegation that went to the Soviet Union was a terrible mistake and a damaging blow at the Left movement. Wherever their political adherence lies, these people are clearly self-deluding idealists, who are unable to fit the facts of life into their political outlook. Worse than this; they are unable to read the lessons of the greatest experiment in history. A fanatic, it is said, is one who having forgotten the end, redoubles the means. These people are that kind of fanatic, and allowing for time and place seem to be the counterpart of groups that emerged in the Soviet Union under the conditions of stress to which I have referred. In relation to specifically political theories, in relation to theories of art, of literature, of music, even of genetic theories, and of linguists, there was undoubtedly a heightened atmosphere of fanatical discussion, which, I judge, grossly over-estimated the political significance of cultural work. An understanding marxist realises, that in a world situation in which the need for close planning is paramount, as for example in the industrial sector and in the scientific and technological sector, the need for tentative experimentation in other sectors, for example the cultural field, equally has its place. Scientists in the Soviet Union assured me that, in so far as they were free to do so, they kept away from certain fields for a time, because these touched on rather dangerous ideological topics and they instanced the case of the Electronic Brain. Here indeed was a marvellous subject for violent polemical argument between the mechanical and the dialectical materialist, and a scientist who is competent to handle problems in "programming" and its symbolical treatment is not anxious to become entangled

in what is to be meant by a "brain" just because that happens to be the usual word for this kind of electronic machine.

Planning can become mechanical regimentation, and it can defeat itself under the specific conditions of a modern revolutionary situation. The most advanced, politically coherent, section of workers stems from the towns. They are the industrial workers thrown into close contact with each other day by day, in an atmosphere of books, newspapers, ideas and discussion. They see the whole process from the raw material to the finished article pass through the machine before their eyes. Their understanding, and their values, and their judgments are very different from those of the agricultural worker who lives a silent, almost inarticulate life, but whose labour, detailed knowledge of nature's ways, and output, directly affects survival. The cream of the working class begins its planning from the industrial end, and immediately draws away from the country the young potential agricultural worker. The town is a much more attractive place. By the time the industrial leadership turns its attention to agriculture, fumbling its way; uncertainly in a strange region, the damage is done. As in Poland today they find themselves confronted by a population of old men and women, with no younger generation to succeed, wedded, in a modern epoch, to manual handling of ploughs, and to animal labour. An industrial leadership, however advanced and understanding they may think they are, has to have behind it groups of industrial functionaries, and any such set-up begins to develop a structure and a permanence of its own. It is too much to expect the kind of flexibility and mutual adjustment that is necessary to handle such human and socially important problems with patience and judicial care. So it blunders forward. Alternatively it avoids the dangers of false decisions, so it hesitates, covers itself with safeguards and becomes an overlaid bureaucracy. These are universal characteristics of government, but they become particularly pronounced and sharp during a long period of stress and strain of the type we have discussed here. And they are tinged in a particular way when they emerge in a society which is attempting in one generation to take the enormous stride from Czarist Feudalism to Modern Socialism. That is why, when we talk of the values of the people under Soviet Socialism, we must not fall into the trap of imagining we are dealing with a uniform society. A volent discussion on Linguistics is not likely to emanate from a village in Eastern Siberia. It is a town issue. Lenin, Bukharin, Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev were all townsmen deeply concerned with theoretical ideas. In many ways Stalin was an exception — but with them all, in their early days, theory was terribly important, and when they visualised the proletariat, "it was the industrial worker who was in the forefront of their minds.

All this is crammed full of lessons for the Socialist move-

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ment and those who would turn their faces away from it, instead of looking squarely at the kind of issues that have to be handled as they emerge in the practice of building socialism, have stopped learning. They are no longer any use to the movement. But here, in this country they are a danger in another way. Let me explain. No man ever went on strike as a result of a theoretical analysis. A man takes action of this nature only when he and his colleagues suffer from a grievance, when they feel an intense sense of injustice. Given the sense of injustice he is able and anxious to listen to its analysis and its rational explanation. In its appeal for support, therefore, any political party must first stand for the remedying of an injustice, and the individual appealed to must believe that it means it. There is no room for double¹ talk in this. If a worker is genuinely horrified at what has been revealed about the Soviet Union, he is being genuinely moved about an injustice to others. If you are not really at one with him in this you are no use to him. His feelings and yours have to "click," and only thereafter will you be in a position to explain to him how it all happened. To say it is not our business to criticise is to miss the whole point. We are not criticising — we are expressing a genuine horror and dismay, and we are struggling to understand its source. Speaking recently at a meeting "up North" I was told by a woman in the audience how on making her usual "Daily Worker" round on a Saturday afternoon, she was met at one door, at which she had always been a welcome visitor, by the usual housewife, but this time with a stony, rather frightened expression. **When offered** the paper, the housewife stepped back shaking her head with her hands behind her back. No appeal from the young woman for an explanation could evoke any response. Finally a voice from inside shouted "Go away — we don't trust you."

Very well — that is the essence of the problem. You may produce as many versions as you like about the "British Road to Socialism" or pamphlets on "Democratic Centralism," etc., etc., but if people are not in a position to trust you, if people do not believe that you feel as they feel, that you are not emotionally at one with them, it is just so much waste paper. We have heard a great deal about rehabilitation these days. Let us begin by rehabilitating ourselves in the eyes of the people from whom we wish support for Socialism. How to do that is the primary problem. The rest will follow.