

DISCUSSION : SOCIALIST HUMANISM*Jack Lindsay: Socialism and Humanism*

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From JACK LINDSAY :

With Edward Thompson's call for a socialist humanism, the expression of Marxism true to itself, I am wholeheartedly in accord; and I should therefore like to comment on the two replies to his argument in *The New Reasoner* No. 2. These replies vary in their stresses, but agree in seeing Thompson's position as untenable. A. H. Hanson denies any possibility of uniting socialist humanism and scientific socialism; he seems to cling still to some hope of a presumably unscientific socialism and to identify the consistent waging of the class-struggle with a "battlefield morality," a machiavellianism that justifies any means by the ultimate aim of a classless world-society. Charles Taylor is less extreme; but in calling for an agreement that "the proletariat must not free itself by depriving some men of their status as human beings," he argues that Marxism has been faced since 1917 with a dilemma. It has had to choose between driving for increased control of nature and ending the alienation of man (from himself, his fellows, and nature) by staking everything in brotherhood; and it has chosen the first course.

Both writers say many cogent things in their analysis, but their conclusions are not consequently proven. And I think that nothing will be proved by anyone until we get clear what we mean by the term Marxism itself. It can refer to a method of dialectical thinking and acting, or it can refer

to the body of ideas and procedures that have been built up by certain important thinkers who have operated along the main line of movement leading to the Soviet Revolution and the construction of Soviet Society. It is true that in the past, while insisting that Marxism is a method and not a given system of laws and applications, Marxists have too often carried on as if there were in fact an authoritative corpus to which appeal could be made — until, in the words of my Rumanian friend A. Yar, the power to think dwindled to the power to find enough words to connect two quotations. But that is to identify the method and the corpus, which is illegitimate.

It is true that a heavy problem remains when one has said that.

The corpus cannot be shrugged aside. We cannot academically decide to adopt a Marxist dialectic without any relation to the thought of Marx and those who have historically played the main roles of building upon his work in the practices that have led to socialism. No scientist begins his science in a vacuum because he wants to get a fresh and vital grasp of reality; he must take into consideration the body of scientific work built up over the years; but he must continually take a critical attitude to it, and he must be ready to question and discard laws and principles that have seemed to become a very part of the fabric of science itself. It is necessary for Marxists to

keep always before them the distinction between the dialectical method as an instrument for comprehending truth (not an external abstracted instrument, but a form of knowledge that deepens and is organically enriched at each extension of its processes) and the corpus of Marxism which has been built up already. And he must be ready to confront the moment, when it becomes necessary, of sweeping aside "laws and principles" that had seemed to be part of the very fabric of Marxism.

In speaking of the possibility, the need, of socialist humanism, we must thus distinguish between what have been the ideas and practices of Marxists, and what is the position which the dialectical method, creatively employed, takes on this question in the present world situation. The problem cannot be approached in an absolutist way, as Hanson does, with an insistence that Marxist humanism resides only in the future, or as Taylor does, with an insistence that the division between humanist aims and productive drive is unbridgeable for Marxists. We may agree — as I do — that the flaw in past Marxist positions can be well defined by the gap between distant ends and immediate means, between ideals of brotherhood and a ruthless push for industrialisation. But what we have to decide is how far these insufficiencies and distortions are ineradicable and how far they are now anachronisms which, far from being rooted in the nature of "scientific socialism," are in fact impeding the socialist advance or holding back class-societies from becoming socialist.

The first point I would make is that the very fact we are asking these questions — not just you and I, but millions of people all over the world, one way or another — suggests that a new phase has been reached. In the past some of the criticisms we now make were made by various individual thinkers or groups; but they were not on "the agenda of history" as they now are. It was hardly possible in those past years to make them thoroughly and persistently, without falling into antagonism to the Soviet Union and to "scientific socialism," without becoming a lost individualist or a splinter-group, without the inner self-betraying fear of "playing into the hands of the enemy" (which has had such demoralising effects in the past), and so on. It is now possible to make a just evaluation of the ossifications and distortions of Marxism that occurred, and to struggle for the new developments that will ensure no repetitions of the old errors and crimes.

In saying this, I am not concerned with the various resistances put up by persons or parties accounted Marxist, or with the extremely diverse set of reactions that have set in among the Communist Parties, their leaders, their rank-and-file, both inside and outside the socialist lands, since 1956. There have been forward movements as well as resistances: one has only to point to Mao's analysis of the inner contradictions of socialism to realise what vast steps forward are being taken despite everything. But even if the gains were less than they are, my main point would stand. That which was petrified

and inadequate in Marxism has been permanently shattered — though the speed and extent to which the effects of this blow reveal themselves in one place or another will inevitably vary. I mean: however much the old dogmatisms may fight to survive, they are doomed before our eyes. In capitalist countries no Communist Party that clings to them will ever reach a position of power; in socialist countries they may delay but cannot deflate the new forces coming up amongst the youth.

The attitude that Marxism is tied forever down to certain inner contradictions, we may say is valid when applied to the past. For, given the total nexus, we cannot imagine things having happened otherwise; we can see how Marxism was then "fated" to work out as it did. But precisely because we can now realise with something like fulness the reasons, the complex historical causes, for the epoch we may dub Stalinist, we are free from them, raised above them to a new level of comprehension, and therefore able to struggle decisively to swing history into a new direction. I morally reprobate a great deal of things done under Stalin; I denounce the epoch's thinking as a limiting distortion of Marxism; and yet I accept it all in the sense that one must accept history unless one is to isolate oneself in some cranky self-righteousness. I accept it because I am convinced that I can fight uncompromisingly against all that was evil and humanly cramped in it; I fight against all that because I feel more intensely than ever what great liberations of the spirit were

then achieved — the liberations that now make possible the ending-of the Stalinist epoch.

This is the duality of the epoch, its vast constructive achievement both through and despite its evils; and the spiritual state of such an epoch has been correctly defined by Hanson as "futurist" (finding in future good the vindication of much present evil) and by Taylor as intensifying one aspect of alienation while relieving another.

Let us return to the question of Marxism as a method. There is nothing sacred in the word Marxist. But the fact remains that Marx was the first man to confront history in its total development, to grasp the main forces at work, and to chart the forward lines that lead to a truly human society. In so doing, he analysed the inner division or alienation in men that the historical process had brought about, and sketched the ways in which it could be overcome and the whole man of a brotherly earth be born. He thus pointed to the kind of unitary consciousness which is alone adequate to grasp and handle the secrets of material transformation such as nuclear fission, and to express the human unity of world-brotherhood.

We can make this claim without sanctifying any particular analysis of Marx — though inevitably the whole range of his work gains a high respect and needs careful reconsideration at each phase of the struggle for the concrete human unity that he first understood. In returning to his work we must pay him the one mark of respect that he himself would have welcomed — the critical revalua-

tion of it by the processes of dialectical thought which have been at least potentially deepened by the political, scientific and artistic developments since his death.

I see no reason then why we should discard the term Marxist (or the new world-consciousness that is needed — as long as we approach Marxism along the lines I have indicated. And along those lines there is no reason in the nature of things why Marxism should become outdated or exploded, or subjected to insoluble inner contradictions. No reason for identifying it with the narrowings and dogmatisms grown-up in the historical working-out of socialism—even though the overcoming of those weaknesses sets a number of very tough problems. One has only to compare 1957 with 1954 to see that history is moving fast, even if not with the order and coherence that one's intellectual grasp of the issue would like to see. The events also have their own order and coherence, against which one must match one's intellect, both to help the forward march and to find out what is abstract and sterile in one's own concepts.

And so, precisely because I agree with much of the critique in the essays of Hanson and Taylor, I disagree with their conclusions. Who but Marx made possible the terms in which they view the situation — their demand for unity of theory and practice, and for the conscious struggle against alienation in all its forms? I do not see now it is possible to understand what happened in the USSR, in all complex goodness and badness, except by the lights that Marx has

given us. It follows that we must use the same lights to move to the point where the past and present contradictions are fully resolved.

Any analysis, however well-backed by selected facts, which tries to explain the Stalinist epoch simply in terms of C.P. organisation, of the entangled factors that we can group under the heading of Russian backwardness, of the ceaseless pressures of imperial encirclement, of the limitations of socialism in one country, of personal intrigues and ambitions, of secret-police controls, and so on, must all fail, unless they are made within the wider perspective made possible by Marx's concept of alienation. Taken by themselves, outside that perspective, they can beget only disillusion and despair, a fatalist acceptance of evil things on the lines that Hanson outlines, or a retreat from all efforts to formulate scientific socialism and and to understand our world as a whole.

Let us consider some of the consequences of the concept of alienation set out by Marx in his early writings and carried into his later political-economic work as the concept of commodity-fetichism, the domination of man by things, which leads to the "thingification" of man himself. An essential aspect of commodity-production and its fetichism is the division of labour, which has now reached its deadening limit in the rationalised systems of mass-production, and which finds its spiritual expression in the dividing-up of man, his fragmentation.

Marx stated — and the whole logic of his position confirms the statement — that while commod-

ity-production continues, the fetishism or alienation continues, the fragmenting process goes on. He did not say that this happens only in class-society; he simply said that commodity-production implies commodity-fetichism. He was taking for granted, we must presume, that a socialist society would set as its immediate goal the withering-away of the State and the ending of commodity-production. And it was in the struggle centring on these matters that he presumably saw the core of the struggle to "unthingify" man despite all the resistances born from an immemorial process of self-division, of abstraction from reality.

We may then generalise. The struggle against alienation under capitalism is concentrated in the struggle for the socialisation of the means of production; under socialism, in the struggle for the whole man, the all-round man, who embodies the new unitary dialectical consciousness and who implies by his very nature the ending of fetishism and fragmentation, the ending of commodities.*

But the confused tangle of historical forces which made Russia the first socialist country surrounded by imperialisms, made it impossible for the struggle against alienation to assume the primacy that it should in any Marxist world-view. It brought about the division to which Taylor refers. It laid all emphasis on the drive

• I feel that we need two terms: *alienation* which arises from a definite historical process, as described above - and, say, *individuation* (or perhaps *dividuation* to define the process of separation-from and return-into nature, separation-from and return-into society, which represents the dialectical process of all human development and which we cannot foresee as ending in any society. One of the reasons for confusion about alienation (i.e., in Existentialism) is the confusion of alienation with individuation,

to increase production since no other way could the USSR survive. This is the situation in which the C.P. of Russia had to change from a revolutionary party fighting an extreme class-tyranny into a party leading the way into socialist construction. Inevitably Marxism as a method was shelved and a certain selected aspects of Marxist political economy were canonised as the dogmas that determined the course of the new society; and the party tended to become a managerial caste, to whom all things which advanced, or seemed to advance, socialist construction were permissible. Hence the continuance of the alienating process as the gap between the ruthless present and the comradely future, between the proletarianising pressures exerted on the wretched peasantry and the socialist ethic that demands the withering-away of the state.

All this is true, I believe; and in the situation created by the 1956 revelations and disasters it is necessary to lay an extreme emphasis on the persistence of alienation in a socialist society still tied to commodity-production — indeed in many respects there is an intensification of alienation beyond its class-levels (precisely because the contradiction between the fact and the ideal becomes more pronounced under socialism than ever under capitalism). Yet it would be incorrect to halt at this point.

In even the most repressive and blinkered socialism there have been liberated forces of education, of culture, of moral judgment, which must in the long run bring the contradiction between thought and brotherly ideal, into the open - with explosive effects. Thus, even when conditions that prevent free discussion have ensured that change can only come about by intrigue, tension between privileged and less-privileged groups, factionalism and a certain amount of violence (e.g. the breaking of Beria and his gang), it is true that the struggle under socialism is primarily moral and cultural, and is determined in the last resort by the discrepancy between fact and an ideal. We must beware of any tendency to identify socialist and capitalist societies because we can point to a common factor of alienation centred round commodity-production. The fundamental dynamics are different. Capitalism can only function by increasing alienation; socialism, whatever the temporary aberrations caused by a multiple series of historical inheritances and pressures, can only function by lessening it. Even the "futurism" of which Hanson complains was made in terms of the brotherly happiness and the fullness of life which the Stalinist system could not actualise, and thus it had in it the seeds of the demand for brotherhood and fullness here and now.

We may point back to a situation, which was sufficiently analogous despite many differences, to illuminate the point. Even when in the medieval world the Catholic Church ruthlessly con-

trolled all organs of thought and burnt or massacred all dissidents, the day came when the demand for truth, for respect for human dignity, and so on, cored in the original revolutionary impulse behind the Gospels, was able to break through the whole repressive scaffolding. The breakthrough, it is true, could only come when the economic development had reached a certain level; but the raising of production by itself could not have destroyed the Church's controls without the inner conflict of the ruling ideology.

What concerns us now is then the fact that in the years 1954-6 the internal movement of the USSR and the whole world-development had reached a point at which the contradictions of Stalinist Marxism became apparent — not to few lonely thinkers, but crying aloud to high heaven. (The fact that the anti-socialists said a certain amount of true things in their hatred of the USSR has nothing to do with this issue; they were not right in any philosophical sense; and their attacks, with a mixture of facts and calumnies, bear no relation to the admission by the socialist forces of various aberrations and inadequacies, which sets a comprehensive series of new problems for the socialist movement). So far from agreeing with Hanson that the revelations prove his previous feeling of an incompatibility between scientific socialism and socialist humanism, or with Taylor that Marxist Communism must in its nature be defined as an incomplete humanism, I claim that we have now reached the stage when the whole struggle is lifted on to

a new level of possibilities. But if this claim is to be vindicated, there must be a widespread effort to develop Marxism creatively and to restore to its central place Marx's concept of alienation or commodity-fetichism. And indeed the inescapably confused scene that has followed the factual revelations of Stalinist distortions (without a shadow of a Marxist analysis), there have already emerged certain large scale gains: the ferment of youth, the rediscovery of personal responsibility by writers, the analysis of Mao, the movements towards decentralisation and elementary democracy at lower levels, the raising of the issue of workers' councils.

But I would say more than that the positions set out by Hanson are wrong and rooted in a past phase; I would say that they are highly dangerous in their tendency. As I see it, the prime enemy today is not Stalinism. That is not to say that we must halt for a moment in our assessment of its errors and crime; but we must recognise that, for all its still powerful entrenchments inside the socialist countries and in the C.P.s outside, it represents the past, it has been exposed, its tightening coils are the death-throes of an outmoded system. What we must move on to consider is the way in which the dogmatic Marxism of Stalin (which also had its good moments) has been replaced by the opportunist politics of Khrushchev and the like with their mixture of excellent measures and vacillating fears. The deepest danger does not seem to me a return to Stalinism. How many of us feared that the disaster of Hun-

gary would mean such a return? yet while complicating and in many ways retarding or repressing the new trends, the check has not been decisive. The new danger, hidden behind the giant wraith of Stalinism, lies in the turning-aside from a "discredited" Marxism, consciously or unconsciously, and setting up instead an opportunist pastiche policy, a low-toned and "practical" attitude, that I think we might christen Consumer-Goods Philosophy.

In this new position it becomes bad or unbalanced that commodity-production was used to build a strong socialist state against Imperialism, but good that such production is used to increase the needs and satisfactions of the producers (employing those terms in the senses of bourgeois economy). But in the new and old viewpoints alike the relation of commodities to alienation is ignored. Let us have a strong state so as to survive; let us lull popular discontent by putting all stress on raising living standards - each aim can be defended as worthy in its nature and its context. But, taken separately like that, they represent the elimination of Marxism. For the fragmentation of man is ignored, or a vague bland assumption is made that socialist ownership ends the issue in any serious way and that education will eliminate bourgeois attitudes. But "education" in such a situation cannot be Marxist in any vital sense; for it is discarding the whole critique that alone could make it a transformative force. In the long run a forward movement no doubt occurs - as it did under Stalinism; but do we want

once more to go through a devious and wasteful course because our understandings fail to rise to the level of the historical issues?

In so far as socialist societies are dominated by what I have called the consumer-goods philosophy, they fall at least as far below the high aims of Marxism as lever Stalinism did. And the presence of chaotic liberalism, linked inorganically with the opportunist Marxism that replaces dogmatic Marxism, does not ensure any cultural vitality. One has only to look at Yugoslav culture, which has gone steadily flatter - whereas Soviet culture, even at its worst moments, has always had certain dynamic qualities.

The new danger, which we can miss by concentrating on the old one, is that we accept without struggle the Consumer-Goods Opportunism, which becomes more and more indistinguished from what we used to call Social Democracy - the views of gradualist parties looking for a continual rise in standards of living, etc., but totally devoid of any sense of the problem of alienation - taking the State as neutral and class-conflict as a mere misfortune of badly-distributed incomes, etc. Stalinist thought saw the State as a good thing once the means of production were socialised; under Khrushchev the State is still a good thing as long as it raises standards of living; to Social-Democracy the state is a good thing, neutral, once a certain level of political democracy is reached and material progress is at all maintained. To the Marxist the State is a thing of force, and so by its very nature evil, though a necess-

ary evil before the stage of Communism. (Stalinist thought saw the state as a thing of remorseless force against its enemies, a sustaining thing to its adherents, both to a hundred-per-cent degree).

I am not trying to identify the capitalist and the socialist states because they are both things of force any more than I am trying to identify alienation under capitalism with alienation under socialism; but unless we see clearly the points of resemblance, we cannot see truly the points of difference. The important point at the moment is that once a socialism, however rigidly controlled, can rely at all on world-peace and can turn more to raising the levels of commodity-production for consumption, it inevitably approximates to a social-democratic position - to the extent that it has failed to understand the problem of alienation. Then, instead of sacrificing people to a great and good future -- which has its heroic aspect—it does its best to buttress the alienating process at its most deadening points. Here I believe to be the last great concentration of the die the veiling and distorting process, that we must defeat to become human. The need is to go beyond Stalin, not to sink below him.

Linked with the confusions and distortions that I am analysing are the illusions that many intellectuals and others, repelled now from Communism, have built up about Social-Democracy and the Labour Party. These illusions can only have calamitous effects. The Labour Party in practice is no more moral than was Stalin-

ism. I do not refer merely to its failure even to begin to feel the human challenge of Cyprus or Kenya; I refer rather to its concept of progress as the indefinite extension of alienation, its concept of freedom as the equalisation of alienation. The crudest appeal to the class-struggle has its truth and virtue next to this absolute falsification.

I should like to go on from here and set out my view of a Communist world-society as one which, having mastered production by methods drawn from nuclear fission and automation, overcomes alienation by its concentration on the whole man, by its creative development of Marxism as the unitary method of thought and action. Thus art can become a universal activity and science be transformed into something fundamentally simple. The world-society of the whole man will rest securely and serenely on the earth, untormented by "needs and satisfactions" in the sense shared today by capitalist and socialist worlds, freed from the concept of progress as an indefinite accumulation of facts and figures, living in the here and now, and able at

foresaw and which is in many last to enjoy. It will in short be the society which William Morris ways the antithesis of what most "Marxists," drawing their ideas of movement from the world of alienation, imagine of the future.

But all that is to leap into ultimates which must remain cloudy until we have concretely grappled with the immediate issues. The problem -- no easy one — is to supplant the Stalinist pie-in-the-sky and its dogmatic formulations with a creative Marxism without falling into various opportunisms — to build an understanding of what alienation is, even before the material conditions for its full overthrow have been achieved, and to create a true enjoyment of earth even in the midst of many difficulties and distorting pressures.

In this struggle art and literature have a place in the forefront; and they must assume it, without fear or favour, true only to the cause of human wholeness and freedom. These large words are not empty echoes from the radical tradition, as Harry Hanson has it; they now at last take on a full, concrete and realisable meaning.