

The Socialism of the Imagination: Its Mystique and Prospects

ANY DISCUSSION OF the future of Socialism must begin with the question: which, or what kind of Socialism are we talking about? Many answers are possible but I will limit the discussion to three versions of Socialism.

To begin with there is *the Socialism of Communist one-party systems* which have claimed to be socialist and whose claims were largely accepted in the West as in the Third World, at least semantically. For example an author discussing Socialist morality wrote: "The most objectionable uses of force by *Socialist governments* in this century... [were] Stalin's war on the kulaks and Mao's use of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolutions."¹ They are sometimes also called state Socialist systems (or "existing Socialism"), sometimes "bureaucratic state Socialism", sometimes simply Communist states. This type of Socialism has been (or used to be) embodied in a number of contemporary societies, modelled, in various degrees after the Soviet Union.

These societies have or had in common four major characteristics: They all were one-party systems; they legitimated themselves (or tried to) by some version of Marxism-Leninism; they abolished the private ownership of the means of production; they were to different degrees, intolerant of free expression and monopolized the means of mass communication. (Readers may note that these attributes closely resembled several of those proposed by Carl Friedrich and Brezinski in their definition of totalitarian systems.² Yet I am not suggesting

that all state socialist countries were totalitarian, certainly not during the past quarter century when several of them relaxed their systems of control and regimentation. A recent Soviet discussion noted these commonalities:

All socialist countries have to a greater or lesser extent carried out unfounded repressions, where millions of innocent people have died. Despite all their radical political measures, these countries have not been able to achieve any leap forward in their socioeconomic development, or to reach the level of the developed capitalist societies.³

It is important to emphasize at the outset — contrary as it may be to the emerging conventional wisdom — that these systems were far from totally removed from the theories and propositions of Marx; in fact their practices had incorporated major elements of Marxism, the most powerful of all theories of socialism. They terminated the private ownership of the means of production, introduced economic planning, sought to extinguish "false consciousness" as embodied in religion, adopted Marx's distastes for peasants, and institutionalized his personal intolerance, invested huge resources in disseminating his ideas. Their leaders thought of themselves as contemporary interpreters and disciples of Marx and Lenin. These systems did seek to incorporate into their institutional designs marxist values and principles — it is another matter how successful these efforts turned out to be

and what their unanticipated consequences were.

The current decay of these societies must not prevent us from recalling that they had ambitious blueprints for reordering and transforming major social institutions, even for beneficially altering human nature: they aspired to create a new socialist man — quite unlike the Scandinavian or socialdemocratic varieties of socialism which have been far more moderate and restrained in their goals and much closer to the capitalist welfare states in the West. This apparent commitment to reshaping human beings in some significant way (not merely by the altered socio-economic environment but also through education and propaganda) is among the key differences between state socialist and democratic socialist (or socialdemocratic) systems.

Several of these states ceased to be socialist since the late 1980s and their transformation culminated (during 1990) in the reestablishment of political democracy in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland, while others (Albania, Bulgaria, Nicaragua, and Romania) moved more haltingly in a democratic and pluralistic direction. Since 1985 the Soviet Union itself has also ceased to conform closely to the model proposed above. Today only China, Cuba, North Korea, and possibly Ethiopia and Vietnam are the remaining examples of the state socialist systems referred to here. The transformation or collapse of these political systems in Eastern Europe and elsewhere has been widely perceived as an historic occasion for reassessing the future of Socialism and the ideals and ideas underlying and initially inspiring these systems.

The future of these “existing socialist systems” is clearly bleak. “Existing socialism” or state socialism is profoundly discredited and delegitimated in all its observable incarnations in much of the world and especially in the areas where

it was originally established. This has been initially a slow process, beginning with the disenchantment with the Soviet Union under (or after) Stalin, as the case may be, and ending with the Nicaraguan elections last year, removing the last promising candidate of “existing socialism.” Concurrently the East European dependencies of the Soviet Union collapsed while the remaining state socialist systems (Cuba, China, and North Korea) hardly inspired much faith or following. Versions of “third world socialism” found in Africa are in serious disrepair and in the process of dismantling their socialist features, above all the state control over the economy. It is now widely realized that these systems had not only been politically repressive but also failed to deliver economically — contrary to earlier beliefs which credited them with great material-economic gains achieved at the expense of civil liberties or political freedoms.

It may be noted here that the delegitimation of state socialist systems has been so profound that some of their earlier supporters retroactively deny them any socialist credentials and thereby seek to salvage the ideas and ideals which had originally inspired them.⁴

The second type of socialism may be called the *democratic socialism of the Scandinavian or socialdemocratic variety*. These are multiparty systems with regular and meaningful elections; they seek a balance between negative and positive freedoms, that is, between the maintenance of political freedoms, or civil liberties, on the one hand and social justice, on the other, defined as a more egalitarian income distribution, improvements in the standard of living, and the maintenance of a generous welfare state. These societies have mixed economies with varying degrees of government control or ownership of certain industries and high income taxes.

Democratic socialism as practiced in Scandinavian countries is far from endangered, but it is not likely either to spread rapidly either or to inspire a large enthusiastic following or move the masses elsewhere. There have been no political pilgrimages to these countries, no intellectuals returning with tales of a new, humane social system which attained a synthesis of political freedoms and social justice, or widespread economic benefits. Accolades have not been lavished upon these systems in earlier times or since the collapse of the state socialist model. Their major failings, as far as many potential Western sympathizers are concerned, are the lack of revolutionary rhetoric and excitement, and of commitment to the fundamental transformation of society and human beings. Even some of their own intellectuals, such as Jan Myrdal of Sweden, found them outright dreary and uninspiring and sought political uplift in places like communist Vietnam, China under Mao, and even in Enver Hodzha's Albania!¹⁵ It is noteworthy that most Western devotees of (a yet to be realized) socialism were never strongly or discernibly attracted to these systems. One may suspect that they have found them decent enough but a bit bland, insufficiently communitarian, and not meeting their spiritual longings and offering little by way of making life meaningful. Indeed the problem of the Scandinavian or socialdemocratic model of socialism (from the point of view of Western intellectuals with socialist leanings) is precisely that it leaves the pursuit of meaning and happiness largely in the hands of the individual not unlike the pluralistic capitalist systems. It is safe to say that these systems are not threatened by the demise of the state socialist (or communist) states. However, neither can they be easily replicated, given the unique historical, cultural, demographic, and economic circumstances

which allowed them to evolve.

The third type of socialism I shall call the *socialism of imagination* or the socialist ideal. This may be further subdivided into two varieties, with the first representing idealized versions of existing state socialist systems described by enthusiastic Western visitors earlier in this century. Their characteristics can be glimpsed from the accounts of Westerners who toured the Soviet Union under Stalin, China under Mao, and Cuba in the earlier years of Castro. What they described with great and genuine enthusiasm were clearly imaginary societies conjured up by a blend of wishful thinking, projection, misperception, ignorance, and impressions fostered by the conducted tours, or the lavish political hospitality that was extended to these visitors.⁶ Receptivity to the attractions and claims of these systems was and remains directly proportional to the intensity of aversion Westerners felt toward their own societies.

The second ideal or imaginary type of socialism is less clearly defined in its institutional aspects, a "caring" society that incorporates the most generalized values of Western liberalism, the Judaeo-Christian ethics (minus God), and the most idealistic notions found in the writings of Marx and other Marxist thinkers. This is the socialism of the best of all possible intentions, not anchored in anything in existence, at once democratic, participatory, and egalitarian fostering both communal bonds and respect for the individual, highly productive without being competitive, materially abundant without being spiritually impoverished.

In light of what has been said about the three kinds of socialism, it is, the latter, the socialism of imagination, — that is to say, socialism as a theory, an ideal, and an aspiration, — that remains the most potent and has the best prospects to survive. Despite the manifest

failures of applied socialism in Eastern Europe, in the Soviet Union and elsewhere, the socialist ideals or the socialism of imagination is likely to persist among some elite groups in the West who find their own social institutions and way of life unsatisfactory. Socialist ideals, vague as they may be, will continue to tantalize and appeal to these segments of the populations, and first and foremost to the intellectuals. This is by no means a new finding. The question of current interest is how the present-day appeals of socialism differ from the attractions it exercised almost half a century ago when Raymond Aron wrote *The Opium of Intellectuals* (1955) or, for that matter from its appeals which were noted by Gustave Le Bon and Emile Durkheim almost a century ago.

It is of further interest to ponder and if possible to understand how is it possible for Socialism to retain its appeals given the recent experiences of countries which sought to join theory and practice.

The contemporary appeals of Socialism (which have survived the experience of "existing socialism") can best be explained by the transformation of socialist ideals and by the changing meanings and implications of the socialist outlook and identity (in the West).

To proclaim such a disposition or belief need not mean any serious expectation that the adherent of socialism will ever live in a socialist society or will see the rise of such a system elsewhere in the world, or that he intends to engage in any sustained activity designed to bring about the emergence of such a system. Thinking of oneself, then, as a socialist or favoring socialist ideals today in the West means not so much a commitment to specific political goals and programs but rather a reaching out for a new source of personal identity and self-esteem.

The development outlined above has coincided with the idea of socialism, or socialist ideals becoming increasingly

diluted and with the growth and diversification of the meanings and interpretations of what is socialism, and the growing number of values socialism has come to be associated with in recent times. Socialist ideals appear to be in the process of being transformed from a social-political program and public ideology into a code of personal morality. Many people (intellectuals for the most part) who do not expect to witness the realization of socialist ideals nonetheless regard themselves as "socialist" and take much pride in such identification (as used to be the case of people who liked to think of themselves and announced to the world that they were "men of the left").

Increasingly, in Western countries, professing socialist beliefs has become less of a commitment to a specific political party or movement than a way of assuring one's self of being possessed of some rare but genuine idealism and sound moral credentials. (This trend intensified in the United States during the Reagan presidency during the 1980s, which some social critics considered a period of unbridled greed and self-seeking.) For many people "socialist" has come to mean simply decent, generous, humane, caring or unselfish⁷ in addition to the many other more traditional meanings and associations of socialism, prominent among them the achievement of high levels of socio-economic equality. The belief in equality remains a centerpiece of surviving socialist ideals even on the part of those who occupy elite positions in Western societies. As a recent commentator put it, "It is the image of sociality in which *everyone* cohabits at the top, *everyone* pronounces the dictates of reason. The power of this ideal is exhibited by its endurance in the face of a distinctly contrary socialist practice."⁸

There is something puzzling about the apparent commitment of leftist intellectuals in the West to the socialist ideal of

equality. What exactly does it mean to them and wherein lies its most keenly felt attraction? Surely most of these intellectuals located at the upper reaches of the hierarchy of social status and educational accomplishment (if not income) do not actually believe that they are at the present time morally and intellectually equal to the masses, most of whom, in their view, exhibit some symptom of false consciousness. Support for greater material equality is the most tangible aspect of equality-seeking; champions of equality also seem to believe in some deeper, more essential meaning of equality. Of late these egalitarian impulses have come to manifest themselves in the rejection of any hierarchy, any distinction, even of any notions of excellence and quality in art or education — reflected in the impassioned attacks on “classism” and “elitism” on the part of people who, whether they want it or not, constitute an elite. (Who is to say that Bach’s compositions are superior to Rap music?) Equality is also revered as “fraternity,” a seemingly essential adjunct or precondition of some authentic community where nobody has reason to look up or down at anybody.

Socialism in the West, and perhaps foremost in the United States, also continues to mean a variety of other, somewhat disparate things, including mass participation in public affairs, a more genuine political democracy, personal liberation (or self-realization), the growth or recreation of sustaining communal bonds, the public ownership of the means of production, an end to poverty and all forms of material deprivation, social harmony, sound environmental policies, universal enjoyment of work, taking good care of the old and sick, an end to personal loneliness, the extinction of all unattractive human qualities especially greed, competitiveness, and power hunger. It was “a socialism of the heart” that Tom Hayden and Staughton Lynd were

looking for (and found) in communist North Vietnam a quarter century ago and what they and their generation of estranged Americans are still looking for.⁹ It is a pursuit that captures the longings of those who find little meaning, warmth, and community in their own Western societies. It would be interesting to know what the reactions of Marx, Engels, or Lenin would have been upon encountering a concept such as the “socialism of the heart.”

Perhaps central to the process here discussed — the growing number of values, ideals, and aspirations the concept of socialism has come to symbolize or stand for — has been a decline of interest in the more strictly material and economic problems socialism was supposed to solve. The attractions of socialism have become decreasingly material and institutional and more spiritual and personal. Durkheim was among the first to recognize these potentials in socialist theories and beliefs. He wrote:

Socialism... is entirely oriented toward the future.... It is an ideal. It concerns itself much less with what is or was than what ought to be. ... Socialism is not a science, a sociology in miniature — it is a cry of grief, sometimes of anger, uttered by men who feel most keenly our collective malaise.¹⁰

Gustave Le Bon was also among the forerunners of those who discerned the meaning-seeking and quasi-religious qualities of socialist beliefs:

Socialism is becoming a belief of religious character.... Each [man] at the bidding of his dreams, his ambitions, his hopes perceives in Socialism what the founders of the new faith never dreamed of putting into it.... It is the sum of all these dreams, all these discontents, all these hopes that endows the new faith with its incontestable power.¹¹

Along similar lines a more recent sum-

mary of the attractions of Marxism (which is after all the major source of socialist ideals and theories) was provided by Leszek Kolakowski:

The influence that Marxism has achieved, far from being the result or proof of its scientific character, is almost entirely due to its prophetic, fantastic, and irrational elements. Marxism is a doctrine of blind confidence that a paradise of universal satisfaction is awaiting us....Almost all the prophecies of Marx and his followers have already proved to be false, but this does not disturb the spiritual certainty of the faithful....In this sense Marxism performs the function of a religion and its efficacy is of a religious character.¹²

It may be argued that these diffusely religious or quasi-religious potentials and attractions of socialism are irrelevant to, or might even increase in proportion with, the failures of the theory to become embodied in observable, durable, and satisfactory social institutions or systems. If so, the current experience of communist states (existing socialism) need not be a fatal blow to the ideals of socialism and need not disillusion those who, in Durkheim's words, "feel most keenly our collective malaise." In that case the expressions of relief on the part of some Western Marxists at the collapse of existing socialist systems may be genuine. They may indeed be pleased that their yearnings and fantasies need no longer be circumscribed, contrasted to, or constrained by existing realities. Philip Green a political scientist at Smith College (in Northampton, Mass.) asserts: "For all sorts of leftists around the world, it is as though a great albatross has been lifted from around our necks....We are finally free to conduct debate (about Socialism) on our own terms."¹³ As theory and practice more and more conclusively part company, the socialism of the imagination can take renewed flight.

The gradual abandonment or dilution of the original theory expressed in the

increasingly diverse meanings of socialism is also connected with the hard to repress awareness that the original theory has proved difficult to apply or realize. This was first suggested by the Soviet experience in the 1930s; subsequently, each new arrival to the "socialist camp" (China, Cuba, Vietnam, Nicaragua, etc.), while initially arousing high hopes, eventually led to new disappointments; after a while none of the existing socialist states could qualify as "socialism with a human face". Finally, the unravelling of many of these states in the late 1980s could no longer be ignored as it raised once more and most seriously the problems of the theory-practice relationship.

Thus, two things happened more or less simultaneously. While it has been grudgingly admitted at last that none of the existing socialist states were admirable or did justice to the theory which supposedly guided and inspired them, it has been claimed that the bad practice derived from a good theory is no reflection on the theory, or that the discredited practices had nothing whatsoever to do with the theory.¹⁴ Secondly, the process noted earlier gathered speed as increasingly broad interpretations of socialism were adopted and as socialism gradually became synonymous with a wide range of uncontroversial Western liberal and humanitarian values.

There is yet another reason for the stubborn clinging to Marxian socialist ideals on the part of Western intellectuals and their followers. Socialism and its benefits have been increasingly redefined as primarily spiritual, just as the damages caused by capitalism have increasingly been shifted from the material and economic sphere to the spiritual. In proportion to the growing emphasis on the damage capitalism, and especially what its American version is supposed to do to the human psyche and personal relationships, the benefits of socialism

came to be perceived as correctives to these harmful forces and influences embedded in capitalism.

In the final analysis the deepest roots of the tenacious survival of the socialist ideals among Western elites is connected to their mistaking capitalism for modernity. It is not the private ownership of the means of production or the disparities of income that provide a key to the propensity of many Western intellectuals to persist in a state of chronic moral indignation and in turn to reach for the visions of social justice and harmony socialism had promised. Rather it is the discontent with modernity, with life in a secular, individualistic, rich, and pluralistic society which provides no authoritative answers to the great questions and riddles of life and death or spiritual resources to draw on. It is the impersonality, social isolation, and meaninglessness associated with modernity and pluralism that those attracted to socialist ideals seek to escape or overcome. In that respect, too, Durkheim anticipated some of the main-springs of the malaise that predispose intellectuals more than any other group to find comfort in the pursuit and anticipations of a socialism that exists only in the imagination. It is modern Western societies which are "... in large part freed from the moderating action of regulation," where "appetites have become freed of any limiting authority," and where some people suffer from "the malady of infinite aspiration."¹⁵ Neither these aspirations nor the appetites can be appeased by the available nourishments.

Once upon a time socialism was a theory, a set of ideas and ideals offering a path to a more humane and painless modernization. It is one of the ironies of our times that, having failed as a theory of modernization, Socialist ideals have

survived mainly in the service of the rejection and criticism of modernity. The socialism of the imagination here discussed feeds on the counter-modernizing impulses,¹⁶ the discontents with modernity noted above. More than ever before socialism survives as a form of utopia seeking which, as others before it, rests on the refusal to accept the human condition, that is, the incompatibility of many of our cherished values and desires.

—Paul Hollander

¹Daniel Little, "Socialist Morality: Towards a Political Philosophy for Democratic Socialism," in Ellen Frankel Paul, et al., eds., *Socialism*, (Oxford, 1989), p. 20 [my emphasis]. ²Carl J. Friedrich, ed., *Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954). ³Christopher Cerf and Marina Albee, eds., *Small Fires: Letters from the Soviet People to OGOYOK 1987-1990* (New York, 1990), p. 106. ⁴Such and other reactions to the collapse of communism are examined in Paul Hollander, "The Berlin War Collapses, The Adversary Culture Endures," *Orbis* (Fall 1990). ⁵Jan Myrdal, *The Confessions of a Disloyal European* (New York, 1968); also by the same author, *Albania Defiant*, (New York, 1976); and *China: The Revolution Continued* (New York, 1979). ⁶Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba 1928-1978* (New York, 1981; and Lanham, Md., 1990). ⁷On this theme see also Paul Hollander, "Lame Hands of Socialist Faith," *Chronicles*, August 1986. ⁸Loren E. Lomasky, "Socialism As Classical Political Philosophy," in *Socialism*, cited, p. 135. ⁹Straughton Lynd and Tom Hayden, *The Other Side* (New York, 1966), p. 62. ¹⁰Emile Durkheim, *Socialism* (New York, 1962), pp. 39, 41. ¹¹Gustave Le Bon, *The Psychology of Socialism* (Wells, Vt., 1965), pp. X-Xii. ¹²Leszek Kolakowski, *Main currents of Marxism*, vol. III. (New York, 1978), p. 525-526. ¹³Robert Grabar, "Marxists in Area Predict Better Times for Socialism," *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, (Northampton, Mass., February 8, 1989). ¹⁴Paul Hollander, "Marxist Societies: The Relationship Between Theory and Practice," *Annual Review of Sociology*, (Fall 1982). ¹⁵Cited in Steven Lukes, *Essays in Social Theory* (New York, 1977), p. 78. ¹⁶Peter L. Berger, "The Socialist Myth," *Public Interest*, (Summer 1976); see also Adam Ulam, *The Unfinished Revolution* (Boulder, 1979).