

# *Is Socialism Dead?*

SOCIALISM IS MUCH OLDER than Marx, it is an outgrowth of Christianity. "Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's" did not aim exclusively at the imperial administration, tax collection, and the state apparatus, it also meant, in Jesus' mouth, some kind of justice in the attainment of life's necessities. From the beginning, the Christian was a *socius* of other Christians, and in many communities goods were held in common. Monasteries were also founded on the principle of equal work and equal reward. In the fourteenth century the Franciscans's radical wing, the Fraticelli, were condemned by Rome for their preaching of absolute poverty in the midst of a civilization where urban life and the burghers's style began to be founded on capitalist methods. But what is important in the Fraticelli movement is, more than the claim of imitating the poverty of Jesus and his Apostles, the general underlying theme of fighting for justice, against the superiors' arrogance, and the unjust distribution of power. Modern Socialism, in spite of the Marxian deviation in the direction of "science," "scientific Socialism," inherited these medieval claims as formulated by the Waldensians and other heretical movements. This suggests that Socialism has more than merely economic discourse.

It should be understood that the superiority of capitalism as *productive* of goods is not in question, and that economically speaking, Socialism, then as now, concerns itself with *distribution*. The contrast between the two systems assumes caricatural dimensions when politicians and professors declare that social ills *can be cured by new tax money directed at such and such a problem-area but at*

the same time they try to stifle the mechanism of production through strikes and unrealistic demagogy. This, in a nutshell, suggests the unpreparedness of today's Socialists to manage a viable economy. Ex-chancellor Helmut Schmidt, a socialist, had at least the lucidity some years ago to warn his Party: "Let's not kill the [capitalist] cow which gives us meat, milk, and hides." The socialist temptation has always been to despise the producer and the distributor, and regard only the consumer's interest, and within this group that of the "little guy." Socialists refuse to answer the question, How can the consumer and the little guy be provided for if the producer's interests are disregarded and if he becomes the target of blame and attack?

There is, however, another side too, and it has arguments of its own. Our civilization is not only rational but also Christian, with a built-in tilt toward charity, and more than charity, a built-in bad conscience *vis-à-vis* the poor and *vis-à-vis* what is perceived as social injustice. Capitalists and libertarians may show statistical tables in order to demonstrate that there is no such thing as a free lunch and that a free-market economy satisfies needs on all levels better than the Welfare State or any other Socialist program—arguments that will forever be rejected by a Joseph Proudhon, a Thorstein Veblen, a Charles Péguy, and a Dorothy Day. Why? Because systems built on money and profit are, for many sensibilities, not consonant with the Christian discourse and with the sense of justice it has instilled in members of this civilization over the centuries. Rational arguments propose that if we wish to get from Point A to Point B, then Route

C is the shortest; the Romantic response is that C may indeed be the shortest, but the D, E, and F lead through a more attractive landscape, with cleaner air and less traffic.

It goes without saying that the socialist position is not merely sentimental. Nor is it a sign of societal or national exhaustion, as Igor Shafarevich suggests, since some of the most important public works were accomplished under “Socialist” regimes, including the Great Wall of China, the pyramids of Egypt and pre-Columbian Mexico, and the irrigation systems of Mesopotamia. Writers like Louis Dumont and Karl Polanyi put forward the following thesis for the explanation of socialism and its continued popularity: In all pre-modern societies the economic facts used to be embedded in the social fabric. Ours alone has excised these facts and built them into a distinct system, which we now regard as self-regulating and as regulating the rest of (non-economic) facts for the better. In other words, Dumont and Polanyi claim that we have turned economic life into an ideology, a quasi-religion, a solution to the “riddle of history.” The economic agent, an individual or a corporation, a bank or a transnational company, is regarded now as the carrier of “values” which in turn are expressed in economic terms. For this view, history since the Reformation has been a gradual accumulation of advantages whose motor is the predominance of the individual over the institutions: family, church, education, the common good, culture, etc. Dumont sums up the process as follows: “When there is nothing ontologically real beyond the individual, when the concept of law is no longer tied to a natural and social order but to private individuals, the latter become the basic modern entity. Order and hierarchy are abolished in favor of individual *potestas*. The community is supplanted by the individual.”<sup>1</sup>

Whether this evaluation is correct or

not is not now the question. The fact is that the rise of individualism, not to be dissociated from a capitalist economy and liberal-individualistic values, has called forth a reaction, variously named as nostalgia for the Middle Ages, or nineteenth century romanticism, or modern “socialism.” This reaction can be ascertained in the phenomenon of German (and other) religious socialism—see the works of Paul Tillich—the socialism of Lamennais and Proudhon (“utopian” according to Engels), Russian village socialism, and the numerous agrarian reformers of Central-Eastern Europe between the two world wars. Hitler’s own movement carried for a time some genuinely socialist, non-Marxist, elements that Hitler eliminated one by one on the pretext that they were close to a form of national bolshevism, a consideration of some worry for his later allies, the barons of German industry.

There are contemporary writers who take a different approach from that of Shafarevich. Jacques Ellul observes in a recent work<sup>2</sup> that whatever is the ideological backing, capitalist or socialist, the process of industrialization engenders an underclass, a proletariat. There is “no innocent industrialization,” he notes, not even in third world countries, where attempts to rise from the status of a proletarian nation bring forth an internal proletariat. In other words, economic progress or stagnation may not be the only poles of a dilemma; profiteer and proletariat seem also to be an indissoluble couple. This quasi-Hegelian view (the *n*th version of the master/slave relationship) goes a long way toward discrediting Adam Smith’s optimism and justifying the formulation of some kind of “socialist” ideology, and necessarily so, since Ellul’s description of the proletariat contains cases clearly inviting an ideological response on the victims’ part: they are “dispossessed of time,” they are “uprooted,” they suffer from a “sickness

of civilization," etc.

The message is that while free market argument points to the regularly occurring absorption of vast sections of workers in industrial well-being, regularly new categories appear and join the proletarian reservoir. Fernand Braudel observed<sup>3</sup> that since the Middle Ages, that is, since the dawn of bourgeois finance capitalism, economic activity proper has been concentrated in relatively few hands, leaving enormous majorities in marginal positions, strangers to monetary exchange transactions. These marginals cannot yet be called a "proletariat," for they are for the most part, consumers of their own products during cycles of a quasi-subsistence economy. But as soon as capitalism, under the pressure of incipient industrialization, began organizing the totality of the market, marginalization, both economic and psychological, became more acutely felt, with the corresponding need for the formulation of a coherent system of convictions, a program, an ideology. In fact, the phenomenon matured since the late Middle Ages, when many sects began proclaiming the "social gospel," still inarticulately fused with the eschatological message. A number of popes understood the significance of these movements when they called forth and dispatched Dominicans and Franciscans as agents channeling new sectarian and social impulses.

Modern socialism was nourished by these early, pre-ideological movements. It developed a sensitivity and a universe of discourse long before Marx put his own stamp on it and perhaps caused it to deviate from its course. What Engels called "utopian socialism" was a bundle of rather significant currents which, however, did not express themselves in terms of political economy (a discipline formulated by eighteenth-century liberals) but in terms of literature, religion, and mysticism. One of the earliest manifestations

of organized protest against economic exploitation may be read in the *cahiers de doléances* that members of the Estates General took with them to Versailles in 1789. The majority of these documents, even from the royalist Vendée, listed complaints by the country folk against the bourgeoisie: high interest rates, grabbing of land, and so on.<sup>4</sup>

It may of course be true, as modern defenders of early industrial capitalism point out, that in absolute terms (whatever that means) the lot of the factory worker in Manchester or Lyons, from 1750 to 1830, was better than that of his rural cousin whom he had left behind in the unrelieved backwardness of the village. The former became acquainted with better organized amenities such as some medical care, a more regular income, and better housing and food. One wonders, however, whether the factory worker registered subjectively these improvements. One is reminded of the peasants of the *altiplano* of Peru or of the Brazilian hinterland who descend to the coastal cities, Lima and Rio de Janeiro, and settle in the *barriadas* and *favellas*. Statisticians will say that their new way of life is superior to what it used to be; but so are their new expectations, fuelled by political and industrial propaganda to which they are exposed in the urban habitat.

In other words, it is an error to look for the roots of socialism from an exclusively economic angle when it turns out that "socialism" is fed by a more diffuse discontent that, in addition, takes varying forms in every society and century.<sup>5</sup> Particularly in our mobile societies, with their dynamic yet fragile economy, marginalization of some sort, a new form of proletarianization, may be very rapid.<sup>6</sup> From such a state of affairs which quickly becomes a state of mind there may only be a short step to "socialism," not as a table of doctrinaire articles, but as an immediately available notion of solidar-

ity, in fact a real or imagined class solidarity. Once such a class has come into being, writes Schumpeter, it hardens in its mold and perpetuates itself, even after the social conditions that had created it disappeared. An illustration of this thesis is provided by the Communist Party of France whose membership composition has considerably changed in the past few decades from blue collar to white collar while the framework and the ideology have remained the same.

Thus, an important point to establish over and against the thesis that socialism equals collective exhaustion, lazy habits, or a conspiracy, is the continuing of socialism (program, discourse, action) in one form or another, from the Middle Ages to the present. Another point of similar importance is that socialism has been a strictly Western phenomenon, although inequality and exploitation, even "savage capitalism," were far more acute throughout history in other parts of the world. However, landowners, maharajahs, mandarins, latifundistas, and feudal lords (e.g. in Japan) never constituted a "class." (The thesis that they did is an artificial interpretation by ideologically opportunistic local Marxists.) Nor did, facing them, the merchants, artisans, and peasants. Each for himself, seemed to be the watchword. This is so true, namely the imported character of both "capitalism" and "socialism" in non-Western lands, that in the countries of the Third World today the unsophisticated will list the following desiderata when asked to define Socialism: the abolition of child labor, the schooling of children, less corruption, and a non-exploitative system of production (by overlords and bureaucrats).<sup>7</sup>

The nature of work, its "quotient of painfulness," does not seem to have substantially diminished through the ages. True, it would be difficult to compare the lot of the slaves in the silver mines in Athens under Pericles with that of today's

9-to-5 bank clerk. But, for one thing, the equivalence of pain ought to be established between Laureion and work in present-day Rumanian uranium mines (life expectancy about six months for political convicts); for another thing, let us not forget that response to the nature of work is also subjective. The current experiments in some Scandinavian countries, or at Olivetti's in Italy with "autonomous work-groups" and with frequent changes of the nature of work within the same unit, have not created "happy" workers. Only automation seems to alleviate the "penibility rate," but this in turn creates nervous fatigue and a feeling of futility. Sociologists note that work at home was practiced only in the Middle Ages when entire families were engaged in textile manufacture, for example, in Flanders. If this method was replaced in modern industry by larger units such as the factory, it is because productivity and work discipline have combined. Schumpeter convincingly argues that modern industry was based on the model of military command; he adds that this was true not only of the capitalist structure, but also of the Socialist structure, which inherited the latter's norms of efficiency.

One of our conclusions must be that with the collapse of Soviet communism the Socialist idea has not disappeared, and perhaps has not even weakened. Its continued survival depends on factors too deeply planted in our civilization, both Christian and industrial, to be uprooted.

I suggest that a doctrine may also be promoted by its very vagueness, particularly in the contemporary world when party rhetoric and the media often prefer blurred contours to ones sharply drawn. In addition to political parties and the media, an increasing number of regimes seem to follow the fashion, affixing to the noun "socialism" some currently attractive adjectives; thus there are military,

revolutionary, scientific, democratic, Christian, and Islamic socialisms. It has become a kind of millenarian belief that beyond the misery, the abuses, the routine of the world as it is organized, there is a "socialism with a human face" which will somehow gather people under one canopy, enabling them to work and play, cry and laugh, become open to each other. This has become a modern myth, impermeable like all myths to rational arguments and tangible experience, to the built-in shortcomings or the terrible abuses of certain forms of socialism.

In the eyes of Western intellectuals, socialism has come to mean a return to simplicity (Rousseau, Claude Levi-Strauss), to the humanization of technology (Ellul, A. Gehlen), and to a kind of archaic, tribal contentment (Marshal Sahlins, Michel Serres). Third-World intellectuals, including non-Marxists, find in socialism the equilibrating factor to Western influence, the guarantee against neo-colonialism, and eventually the rehabilitation of the old ways: village-community, ancestral religion, the art of millenaries. In spite of its Western roots, socialism is forgiven in the Third World much more easily than capitalism, the origin of which is likewise Western. Celso Furtado (Brazil), Shakroukh Meskoub (Iran), Rajni Kothari (India) and many others formulate a rather embellished history of their respective countries in order to illustrate an imaginary local proto-Socialism, ante-dating the arrival of Western capitalism and now submerged by it. We discover through their writings some jealously guarded articles of faith, easily turned into components of a new, Third-World, socialist ideology: the adequacy of old economic techniques, the traditional and equal distribution of goods, a consensual democracy on the tribal or village level. It is obvious why such largely hypothetical antecedents look better in the mirror held up by Socialism, and why so many

Third-World regimes rush for an ideological refuge under its banner. Quite simply, their present condition and future prospects are thus better explained and accommodated, obtaining a greater respectability. The past and perhaps even the future can be more easily rewritten with the socialist ink.<sup>8</sup>

Socialism is not dead, nor is it defeated by the spectacular and truly historic events in Eastern Europe (1989-1990). In fact these and subsequent events are likely to put capitalism on the spot, since it will no longer enjoy the status of a combatant, of an untried competitor in the cold war. The newly accumulating complaints are directed against capitalism, its cultural chaos, its ignorance of all but material consideration, its one-dimensionality. In a recent interview, Alexander Dubcek whom post-1968 Czech socialism had mummified for twenty years, said the following: "Socialism is social justice, humanism, tolerance for social and human rights, in one word, freedom." And he added a sentence that many neo-socialists and ex-communists are likely to echo in the coming years: "The iron fist that crushed the East [Muscovite communism] had nothing in common with socialism." Socialism may return, in other words, as an alternative program, even as an object of nostalgia since capitalism is a breeding ground for the production of a less harsh counter-image.

No political-economic program likes to present itself as an ideology, and capitalism is no exception. It prefers the modest claim of being a technique, a method of organization that uses the given elements of spontaneous interests and the world of objects called merchandise. It is, however, held against capitalism that its technique and methods of distribution reduce all objects to the merchandise status, and not objects alone, for capitalism also mobilizes and manipulates human beings and values.

In fine, capitalism absorbs, no less than socialism, the totality of its field of manipulation, and like socialism reaches beyond that field, expanding it indefinitely.

It is not difficult to foresee the future scenario in which the excesses of the two ideologies, capitalism and socialism, will lead not to mutual neutralization, and thus to a "third model," but to an exacerbation of their conflict. Now that socialism is on the defensive, capitalism runs the added risk of displaying its ideological eagerness, in economic management as well as in international politics. Francis Fukuyama's recent thesis on "the end of history" is an indication of the hubris now seizing the ideologues of capitalism. The nations freeing themselves from the Muscovite grip are being offered, indeed, compelled, to opt for the capitalist model not only in the name of efficiency but also as a means of conversion to an angelic status. Michael Novak once wrote that young Americans ought to enter large business corporations just as in other times other young men joined monastic orders or at least the Church. This may indeed be the high point of capitalism and the low point of socialism, but let us bear in mind that our age has seen the rise and fall of a number of secular

eschatologies. Neither capitalism nor socialism is immune from decadence. Their combined status as a *Weltanschauung* is brittle.

— Thomas Molnar

1. Louis Dumont, *Essais sur l'individualisme. Une perspective, anthropologique sur l'idéologie moderne* (Coll. Esprit/Seuil, 1983), p. 73. 2. Jacques Ellul, *Changer de révolution, l'inéluctable prolétariat* (Ed. du Seuil, 1982). 3. Fernand Braudel, *La dynamique du capitalisme* (Arthaud, 1985). 4. Ellul, *op. cit.* 5. A passage from Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* is apposite: "Man does not act to safeguard his individual interests in material goods, but so as to safeguard his social standing, his social claims, his social assets." (Beacon paperback, 1957), p. 46. 6. This is Yves Barrel's list of marginal groups in Europe through the centuries: heretics, Jews, witches, the insane, aliens, *dé-classés*, beggars, alchemists, students, prostitutes, the deformed, Moslems." To this list, the industrial age has added the rejects of any fast-growing branch of production whom we call unemployed or "candidates for recycling." *La marginalité sociale* (Presses Univ. de France, 1982), p. 95. 7. See for a discussion of these reactions my *Tiers Monde, Idéologie, Réalité*, (Presses Univ. de France, 1983). 8. Instructive of the ideological background in the Third World is *Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution religieuse?* by Daryush Shayegan, writing about pre- and post-Khomeiny Iran (Les Presses d'Aujourd'hui, 1982). 9. The full quotation is: "Young Christians and Jews will . . . better serve the cause of the Kingdom of God and save their souls by restoring the power of the private sector than by working for the State." (*Policy Review*, Summer 1980, p. 28).