

# The Future of Socialism

OF SOCIALISMS, there are many, all centering on the idea of a perfect society of equals, without strife, quarrels, or war. Differences arise in regard as to the question as to what institution or cultural reality has stood in the way of perfect harmony: property, religion, morality, family, the state, a curb on the passions. Nor is there agreement on what should be the way toward social perfection: reform, revolution, history, ideology. It is true, as Igor Shafarevich has said (*The Socialist Phenomenon*, 1980), that Socialism has been with us from the very beginning. For most of the time, it was present in the form of a myth about a golden age, a state of nature without evil, which, however, was seemed lost beyond recovery. It was Stoic philosophy which embraced and propagated this myth. In the Middle Ages we find it again in the *Roman de la Rose*, but as a fable about a perfect past it did not conduce political action of any kind. All the same, in the fourteenth century peasant uprisings in Flanders, France, and England, John Ball, for instance, referred to it in these words:

*When Adam delved and Eve span,  
where was then the gentleman?*

A radical change in this respect occurred in the seventeenth century, when the mythical memory of ideal perfection in the lost past shifted to a dream of a perfect historical future. Perhaps it was nourished by the impression, created by John Locke, that the same kind of certainty about cosmic laws as attained by Newton was now possible about moral laws, and thus about social order. At any rate, from the early eighteenth century, programs of radical social change, with perfection as their immediate aim, began

to appear in print. The first document of Communist doctrine was written during the French Revolution (Gracchus Babeuf), to be followed by a flood of different socialist proclamations in the first half of the nineteenth century, with Karl Marx being the last of these authors.

All this is of little concern to us, at this present moment. We stand in the presence of a major historic event: the collapse of the first major Communist regime and the abandonment of the Communist ideology by its erstwhile leaders. Thus it is only one of the various socialisms that interests us at this moment: Marxism-Leninism. Its dominant characteristic was its assertion of "the laws of history," knowledge of which served the Communist claim that Socialism was the inescapable future not only of Russia but also of all mankind, as manifested by Khrushchev's casual remark, to a Western ambassador, "We shall bury you." Marx also taught that private ownership of the means of production was the real-oppressive power in society, that the proletarian revolution against their capitalist masters would bring all class-struggle to an end so that a classless society would result. Socialist production, for the first time, would engender economic plenty, so that the very problem of distribution would disappear forever. There would then be perfect harmony between society as a whole and the individual. The strength of the Communist movement was their pseudo-religious conviction that they were serving the objective course of history.

Surely it must be this latter conviction which has been shaken beyond recovery.

ery. If any socialist in the future would dare to speak of socialism's "historical necessity," the image of the collapsing Soviet regime would cause the words to die on his lips. Would that not also include the myth of Socialism's power to produce economic plenty, or the slogan of a "realm of freedom"? Would anything of the complex building of Communist ideas survive? Would people still dare to call themselves "Socialists," or "Marxists"? The question seems hardly worth an effort to answer it, so obvious do we deem the conclusion. A slow and careful look at Western civilization, however, may give us pause. What about Socialist regimes in Latin America, in Africa, in the East? What about the universities in our country, with entire departments now being composed of Marxists, and none but Marxists being hired? Can we still explain the socialist bias in editorial offices, in the media, in the bureaucracies of government?

Why would a professor of English literature, or an historian, or a political theorist choose Marxism even now? On first glance, one would answer: "Because it is there." Outside of Marxism, only psychoanalysis offers today a consistent body of ideas that might perform the tasks normally expected of philosophy. No philosophy is readily accessible in our time, all of it having been ruled out by positivism. Neither Marxism nor psychoanalysis is philosophical in nature. In other words, philosophy "is not there," in the sense in which Marxism "is there." In choosing Marxism as his world view, a university professor might also feel that his outlook is considered "progressive," as might be psychoanalysis, since both of these idea systems stem from the French Enlightenment, which also produced the progressivist idea of history. Marxism, our professor might also argue, makes for analytical rigor and secures the respect of his colleagues. He will hardly admit that his reason for cling-

ing to Marxism is his unwillingness to look for authentic philosophy as his frame of reference, particularly since, from the beginning, he himself, together with most of his fellow teachers, has strenuously ruled out any view of reality that includes God. For all of these reasons, Marxism looks to him like the best and safest bet. As for the events in the Soviet Union, he would be likely to minimize their importance on the grounds that personal defects have resulted in the mishandling of an otherwise good idea. A single historical failure, he would conclude, does not invalidate valid thought. He might concede that it would be otherwise in natural science, where refutation by experiments would necessarily result in abandonment of the theory. In that sense, he might continue, there are no experiments in the realm of human order. Theory here is not hypothetical: it is itself the substance of order. With all this, he sees himself under no obligation, or even pressure, to drop Marxism at this time.

The Marxism to which our English professor is clinging, however, might not be Marxism-Leninism. We said above that surely the conviction of socialism's "historical inevitability" must disappear. The Communist claim of foreknowledge of history's future must certainly be considered one of the least rational elements in the ideology. Would it be altogether impossible to hold this or a similar view of history today? To this question one must answer with another: If not this view of history, then what other view? We should be aware that Marx's idea of certain knowledge of all of history, including its future destiny, came not from Marx, but from Hegel, and, before Hegel could even be found, in some way, from Kant. A genuine alternative to this outlook would be the Christian conviction that history is mysterious inasmuch as the relation of divine purpose and human wills is unfathomable and unpre-

dictable. The symbol referring to it, "providence," makes no claim to anything like certain knowledge. That claim, however, was made by the Enlightenment, which engendered the notion that history could be divided into a number of parts, or "stages," and thus could be analyzed, and the knowledge of its laws projected into the future.

That kind of thinking resulted in a total turn of human attitude towards historical future. Certain knowledge of it now generated the desire and resolve to manipulate history, to mobilize human forces for the purpose to bring about a new world and a new man. At the core of all twentieth-century ideologies was historical activism, "engagement" in a cause that substituted world-changing action for philosophical inquiry. This attitude has remained with us even after the defeat or collapse of three major ideologies. It is a kind of secular spiritualism, looking on history as a mundane, and political, variety of Christian salvation. Christians believe in the eschatological character of salvation, salvation by God which would not become full until after the end of time, or of history, and, for each individual, after death. From the Renaissance, and, more recently, the Enlightenment, came the perversion of this faith into "Innerworldly Fulfillment," to use the title of a recent book by David Walsh (*Innerworldly Fulfillment. A Study of Jacob Boehme*, 1983).

The problem around which these different views have formed is "meaning" in something like history, the stream of successive events occurring to peoples, kingdoms, empires, rulers, armies, and so on. History, in this sense, is a movement in time in which we, who think about it, are participants who must expect the same history to go on, after our death. "History is meaningful only by indicating some transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts," says Karl Loweth (*Meaning in History*, 1949), and

then adds: "the purpose is a goal." In this sense, the Christian faith in the Kingdom of God, after history, is rational to the same degree to which any belief in an "end" of history in time must be considered irrational, if not for any other reason than because moving the "end" into time leaves the unanswered question of what will happen after this "end" has been attained. Marxism-Leninism cannot answer that question, and neither can any other version of history construed as secular "salvation." The Soviets, under the threat of national collapse, have abandoned their version of this faith. Have we, the survivors who look on ourselves as "victors" in the Cold War, likewise purged ourselves from our spiritual and philosophical perversion? The problem of "meaning in history" is central now to the entire Western world, and with special urgency, to the Central-European nations emerging from Communism's total power. For them, too, the notion of history as "innerworldly fulfillment" appears as "what is there," what they are asked to absorb, as they join, or rejoin, our Western civilization.

The title of this paper seems to look for the answer to its implicit question at our erstwhile enemies, behind the erstwhile Iron Curtain. It seems to me that the question aims in the wrong direction. Now that the ideological regime has assented to its own liquidation, the ball, as it were, is in our court. We, in the West, must probe our minds and souls in order to discover what remnant of socialist belief, or of beliefs that are first cousin to socialism, remains at the center of our thinking and acting. In spite of many admonitions to the contrary, as in the case of Nazism, we were in no wise inclined to assume a share of the blame. The external manifestation of Nazi irrationality was simply too remote from our imagination even to suggest some perverse kind of shared fault. That cannot be the case with that socialism which

has declared bankruptcy in the East. After all, not only must the great majority of our own liberals admit to a tendency to embrace socialist goals, but also we cannot deny the manifold protestations of sympathy, even solidarity, of leading Western intellectuals, with the Soviet empire, emphatically including Stalin.

Our problem is no longer Communist totalitarianism, but all totalitarianism, indeed, all ideology. Our problem should be redefined. What we now have is "the world after totalitarianism," with the accent falling on basic beliefs and their philosophical or irrational character. We are fortunate in that we have at our disposal a great many books that have made clear the three-hundred-year development that led, eventually, to both activist Communism and Nazism. It is, indeed, a "new science of politics," to quote the

title of Eric Voegelin's book of 1952, that has fully cleared up the question of how such phenomena as Nazism and Leninism could be possible. This science, with admirable objectivity, has included, in this same question, also such "phenomena" as Hegel's "System," as well as the loss of the concept of "Being," and the resulting habit of extending critical thinking to the point of "total critique," which logically came to envisage a new kind of being, to be realized by human political action. This is the kind of thing in which we have been involved, these last two centuries. Does that leave us with valid title to celebrate the coming third millennium, as one in which some kind of fulfillment can be expected?

— *Gerhart Niemeyer*