

The Scylla and Charybdis of Socialism

MY COMMENTS ON the future of Socialism are divided into three parts. The first deals with Sovietism, or Marxist Socialism modified by the Russian tradition, and its offsprings around the world. The second has to do with various hues of social democracy, from the vaguely Gramscian Marxist variety to the welfare state of mixed origins. The third deals with one reason why some form of Socialism may seem attractive to the Western political and intellectual elites, and why socialism may experience a revival some time in the future.

For most Americans, Marxist socialism transcends the concept of nationality. In some formulations of the problems of Socialism the word "nationalism" rarely appears. Yet in practice, Socialism has invariably been linked to nationalism. In Russia, Marxist Socialism was made to serve the interests of the Russian empire (but not those of ordinary Russians). In reaction to the growth of Russian nationalism, other nationalisms were also inflamed. The debacle of Sovietism which is now occurring has no less to do with the ripening of nationalist sentiments than it has with the failing consumer economy.

Marxist Socialism made its appearance in the form of Sovietism, which is a way of governing based on Marxist doctrine but remodeled to suit the Russian social and political habits. Just as the democratic forms of government have developed in accordance with local traditions, so is Marxist Socialism a blend of futuristic ideas and local custom. This is

a more important aspect of Sovietism than most American observers have cared to acknowledge. Sovietism has been like a monstrous designer dress bought by a woman who showed a taste for such a dress. The designer can certainly be blamed; but it was the person who bought the garment who actually put it into circulation.

Marxist socialism became permeated with Russian nationalism, just as the "national socialism" of Hitler acquired a distinctly German flavor. The designs and goals of those who made the October Revolution might have been different, but the pull of Russian history was overwhelming, and the Revolution soon acquired nationalistic leanings. After World War II Russian became the lingua franca of Marxist socialism the world over. Whether patriotic Russians like it or not, Russia acquired world prominence thanks to Marxist socialism and not thanks to Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

There exist few scholarly studies detailing and separating these two aspects of Soviet reality.¹ Much more often, scholars disregard the first and pretend that what has been going on in Russia and her contiguous colonies is attributable only to the wrongheaded ideas of Karl Marx and his disciples, and it could have happened in countries not bordering on Russia. As time went on and the Soviet empire's influence grew and became more complex, the web of causality was torn and twisted beyond recognition. However, going backwards, one always finds, as a starting point, the Russian

Revolution of 1917 and the military and intelligence help which the Russian state has consistently extended to those revolutionaries who believed in Marx and Lenin.

Historically speaking, Marxist socialism has been instrumental in prolonging the life of the Russian empire. After 1917, the Catholic and Protestant nations of the Russian empire won independence, but the Orthodox and Moslem ones were forced into the straitjacket of socialism. During and after World War II, with Russia's help, China underwent a similar revolution and Eastern Europe was conquered by the Red Army; finally, with Moscow's help, numerous countries in Africa and Asia also fell victim to the Soviet domination. The countries already ruled by the Moscow-controlled governments were forced to support those Third World revolutionaries who were on their way to power (this is how Czechoslovakia and East Germany became major arms suppliers to Third World terrorists). In the 1950s, one-fourth of the world's population was under Moscow's control, and the Russian-speaking Moscow Politburo was probably the most powerful group of fourteen men in history, even though thirteen of them were the slaves of one. (Let us not argue absurdly that Stalin was a Georgian: Stalin was a Russified Georgian, just as Henry Kissinger is an Americanized German. The idea that one's origins *must* determine one's nationality is about as valid as the idea that the earth is flat.) The spread of Marxist socialism was fueled partly by Soviet imperialism, which in turn was fueled by Russian nationalist ambitions. To see Moscow become the Third Rome used to be the dream of nineteenth-century Russian nationalists; now, with the help of Marxist socialism, the dream was becoming a reality. It is a capital mistake to disregard this aspect of Sovietism in assessing the probabilities of its survival. Yet the euphemism-

ridden political language of the West has largely concealed the nationalistic ingredient of socialist praxis. Secure in their respective nationalisms and uninterested in foreign conquests, the Westerners have turned a deaf ear to the fact that Sovietism has absorbed the Russian tradition of territorial kleptomania, excessive secrecy, and disregard for the individual.

The Russians, oppressed as they were, responded with pride to these unprecedented triumphs of their nation. For instance, during the aggressive wars which the Soviets waged against Poland and Finland in the fall of 1939, the Soviet press was replete with boasts that *Russian* arms were winning against the Finnish and Polish ones. And during the war with Hitler, the Soviet government received the Russians' unconditional support. Not a single coup had been attempted and not one attempt on Stalin's life was made. The great tyrant, in fact, died in bed.

Thus there has been a home-installed and home-operated Marxist socialism, speaking a local tongue and not dependent on a foreign power; and there has been socialism brought in by the Red Army or by another form of Soviet intervention. The first variety has commanded considerable loyalty from the local population, whereas the second has been viewed as an unwelcome foreign import and its grip has been tenuous. And the consequences of Sovietism for the conquered nations have been somewhat different from the consequences suffered by the conquerors. This difference becomes apparent when one compares the international standing of two nations, the Russian and the Czech, before and after the socialist takeover.

Before World War II, the Czechs were among the richest and most developed nations of Europe. Their industries used advanced technology and were second to none in some areas of manufacturing. Now they are among the poorest and

most backward and their factories are hopelessly outdated. Their international standing has decreased owing to the socialist takeover. A similar situation prevails in all the non-Russian European nations that fell under the power of Sovietism. The decisiveness with which the East Central Europeans repudiated Sovietism had much to do with the fact that it was perceived there to be the invention of an alien power.²

In contrast, the Russians have not been not disempowered *vis-à-vis* the other nations but rather increased their importance in the world arena. Before the October Revolution, hardly anyone bothered to learn the language of the czars; now, dozens of American universities have Russian departments. While many Russians perished in the process, others were empowered by the Revolution in ways that were beyond the dreams of the most ardent Russian chauvinists of the nineteenth century. It was the commissars and not the czars that made Moscow a world city. It was Soviet-style socialism and not czarism that created "a nation within a nation," or some 15 million privileged Russians whose representatives appear on American TV speaking fluent English and whose sons and daughters participate in various "exchange" programs. One of the historical consequences of Marxist socialism has been the catapulting of Russia into the tiny circle of superpowers. The fact that Russians thus contributed to world history was, and remains, a source of national pride for a large percentage of the Russian people, even as they bemoan the very real damage which socialism inflicted on Russian religious life, on the self-reliance of the Russian people, and on Russian cities and villages. The fact that the Russians became empowered by their Soviet state is of importance in assessing the net effects of Socialism and its future political chances. If the abandonment of Socialism means the aban-

donment of the empire all the way to returning the stolen gold fields in Siberia to the Yakuts, then the Russian people may not be as supportive of the abolition of socialism as we are sometimes given to understand they are.

However, the story of the symbiotic relationship between nationalism and socialism does not end here. Other nationalisms have been activated as well. The decades-long Hungarian-Romanian dispute over Transylvania is a classic example of how Sovietism agitates national sentiments. The uncompromising insistence of the Lithuanians on national independence is another example. Also, time has disproved the belief (held by some conservatives) that as a consequence of the post-World War II partition of Germany, German nationalism was replaced by ideological differences. In 1988, East Germany had one of the highest percentages in the Soviet bloc of members of the communist party (14.0%).³ In other words, over half of East German families had a party member in their midst. But when the prospect of unification with West Germany came up, the East Germans laid aside socialism and heeded the call of nationalism, while the West Germans cheered. The unification of Germany provides one more proof that Marxist socialism has been, among others, an instrument for seizing power by the stronger nations over the weaker ones.

It is my contention that Soviet-style Marxist socialism has had three ingredients: economic, political, and nationalist. While the first two have been the focus of attention, the third has been obscured by nationalistic interests. While the economic part is sinking and the political one seems to be changing, the nationalistic aspect of Sovietism, largely invisible to Western eyes, continues to act up. In particular, as a reaction to what is perceived to be Russian oppression, nationalism is on the rise in the non-

Russian parts of the Soviet Union. The tangled web of nationalistic animosities which the West contemptuously ignores is part and parcel of the socialist scene, and the dismantling of the socialist economic structures cannot be accomplished without involving it. The idea that either Mikhail Gorbachev or Boris Yeltsin holds the keys to the abolition of Marxist socialism in the Soviet Union is part of an illusion fostered by such meaningless Bukharinite slogans as "Proletarians of all countries unite."

The chances of Sovietism overtaking the West have always been tied to the vigor of Russian nationalism. Now, when this nationalism is incapacitated by economic failure, the chances of a direct takeover, of the kind described in Robert Conquest and J. M. White's book *What To Do When the Russians Come: A Survivor's Guide* (1984), appear to be small. What is still likely, and in fact is happening right now, is the devising of a way whereby Soviet Russia, without fully dismantling its socialist structures, develops a parasitic relationship with the West, siphoning off dollars and marks from Western democracies to shore up its status as a major nation. In 1990 the Germans already promised the Russians \$7.6 billion in aid; the Italians offered over two billion in credits; and in September 1990, President Bush spoke of the possibility of direct American aid to the Soviets as a reward for good behavior in the Persian Gulf. Three years ago the idea that the West would become a milking cow for the Russians seemed too fantastic to be entertained. Now it is becoming a reality. I say "for the Russians," for the aid money will not go to Uzbekistan to repair the damages which the Russian management has inflicted upon its desert-like landscape; nor is it going to help the Baltic nations to regain independence. The Rev. Werenfried van Staaten, a long-time supporter of Christian churches in the East, said in a recent interview: "We

still don't know who holds the real levers of power [in the USSR]. Probably the KGB. . . . Gorbachev . . . has criticized all of his predecessors except for two: Lenin and Andropov. Andropov, the KGB man who was behind the attempt on the Pope's life, created Gorbachev. This is why the Soviet leader can smile as much as he wants, can make the most pious speeches in the world, but still not convince me."⁴ It seems to me that while the economic structures of Sovietism will probably be modified over the next decade, the nationalistic sentiments will persist until the Soviet Empire evolves into a number of countries of manageable size and ethnicity. And as long as one aspect of Sovietism remains in place, the chances of others returning are not negligible.

The situation is different with another form of Socialism, the Swedish-style social democracy. It is obviously free of the nationalist ingredient, indeed of most of the unbearable excesses of Soviet-style socialism such as the irreversibility through parliamentary means of the state's total political monopoly (barring a spectacular economic catastrophe, such as the one which forced Gorbachev to adopt *perestroika*). The citizens of social democratic countries have been free of the fear of physical pain and injury which the secret police could inflict on them at its pleasure. In actual historical practice so far, social democracies have behaved quite differently toward individual citizens than have the Soviet-dominated governments.

It is to distinguish between the Soviet-style socialism and the Swedish social democracy that the Eastern Europeans coined the term "real socialism." An existential experience of "real socialism" indicated to them that there is a qualitative difference between the two. The late Leopold Tyrmand, who spent twenty years in a country of "real socialism," used to say that this was a virtually incommunicable experience. Many other

refugees from Sovietism said similar things. Russian writer Aleksandr Zinoviev has argued that a special type of man, "*homo sovieticus*," was created in the Soviet Union, and he boasted wryly that he, too, is an example of this type. The farther one got from Moscow, the less intense the experience of "real socialism" became, but it was *sui generis* nevertheless. "Totalitarianism" is not a precise term to describe this experience either. What makes Sovietism different is the unique combination of economic, political, and national controls which so far have not been duplicated by the social democracies.

On the other hand, the Swedish variety of socialism means an extent of state control over property and public policy that is counter-productive. As conservatives have pointed out numerous times, such controls do not contribute to the growth of the population's wealth and they tend to congeal into a cliché-ridden, ostensibly liberal, but in practice intolerant official ideology. The pervasive fear of the police is unknown to citizens of the social democratic countries; however, over the years, the social democratic parties have displayed much more sympathy toward the Soviet form of government than have the rightist parties and ruling circles.

Also, some politologists stubbornly return to the idea that perhaps Sovietism and Western social democracy have worked in tandem, and that, indeed, the second gave succor to the first. In *The Grand Failure: the Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century* Zbigniew Brzezinski has argued that since World War II, the Soviet system provided indirect sustenance to the social democratic parties in the West and to the concept of the welfare state. Conversely, "the reliance on the state as the principal instrument of social salvation indirectly enhanced the status of the Soviet system as the most extreme example of state-

planned and state-directed social innovation."⁵

It is in the context of such remarks that one should view the revival of social democratic ideas in post-communist East Central Europe (the Balkans are still ruled by the Marxists). While Sovietism is heading for the dustbin of history, social democracy is increasingly being perceived as an alternative to the communists by the largely left-wing East Central European intelligentsia. While Sovietism is on the decline, social democracy is on the offensive in the post-Communist world. Why is it so and what role have American conservatives played in that development?

I recently corresponded with the president of an American conservative organization to whom I complained about misrepresentation of the East European anti-Soviet revolution at a recent meeting of that organization. This gentleman told me, in essence, that his son was already engaged in sending CARE parcels to Eastern Europe, so please stop bothering me. He apparently assumed that my protest was a plea for a campaign to fill yet another begging bowl. He did not seem to be interested in learning about the ideological landscape in that part of the world. He certainly was not receptive to the idea that conservatives of the world (or certainly those of the United States and Europe) should unite. I had the impression that he regarded the East Europeans as strange creatures who had just jumped off trees and were trying to learn to walk upright, and he was perfectly happy to let them learn on their own, perhaps throwing at them an ice cream cone from time to time.

In contrast, the American left has cultivated the leftist movements in Eastern Europe, both of the communist and of the social democratic variety, providing them with organizational and financial assistance and with access to the American media. For example, an apologist for

the communist regime in Poland, Daniel Passent, has been featured for decades in the *New York Times* as an “enlightened” representative of the Polish scene. He still writes both for the *Times* and for *Polityka*, a discredited communist weekly in Poland. Passent is generally regarded in Poland with the same enthusiasm as were those Americans who broadcast English-language Nazi propaganda during World War II.

Adam Michnik’s *Gazeta International*, a slick English language version of his *Election Daily* [*Gazeta Wyborcza*], advertises the views of the Polish social democrats in America, whereas the Lech Walesa faction, underfunded and bewildered by seeing the fruits of the revolution wrenched away from them, tries to mount a defense while the American right is looking the other way. A similar struggle between Jozsef Antall’s Hungarian Democratic Forum and the numerous left-wing parties is being waged in Hungary. In Czechoslovakia, the battle seems to have been almost won by the social democrats, with a few traditionalists, such as the Rev. Vaclav Maly, observing in distress the speedy dissolution of the anti-communist coalition.

On July 19, 1990, in the *New York Review of Books*, Adam Michnik promoted his version of social democracy and badmouthed the East Central European conservatives by slanderously comparing them to the Russian xenophobe Igor Shafarevich. It was Theodore Adorno’s *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) all over again, a description of the conservative movement in the left-wing American press before William F. Buckley made conservatism respectable. But the East Central Europeans, being two weeks away from starvation, have neither time nor resources to endow their own *National Reviews*, and they will see the political scene monopolized by the social democrats unless support from respectable quarters abroad helps them to maintain

their stance.

The struggle between the social democrats and the conservatives in East Central Europe has never been presented in the American press from the conservative side. Lech Walesa, though a Nobel Prize winner and the real hero of the anti-communist revolution, has not been given an opportunity to explain his side of the story in any conservative publication, let alone in the *New York Times*. (What comes as a surprise to the American conservatives is that he, a labor union leader, belongs in the right wing of the political spectrum). While the East Central European intelligentsia have been cultivated by the American left, the right has largely regarded the Soviet Union and its satellites as a monolithic “Eastern bloc” united in its goals and policies and indoctrinated into the same ideology. The idea in East Central Europe, that the battle between statism and conservatism could be going on just as in Western countries, is simply beyond the realm of interest of a traditional American conservative.

Thus while socialist ideas may be dead amidst the proles in the countries where they were put into practice, especially if this occurred by means of a foreign conquest, they are not dead among the elites. While the proles have emerged out of the communist dark ages pockmarked, weak, and immunized, the elites, though generally opposed to Sovietism, have not given up on the social democratic future.

The way the chips are falling in East Central Europe, it may happen that instead of losing ground, social democracy will score significant gains even as Sovietism loses. As to the Soviet Union, nothing but cosmetic reforms have taken place there so far. There is a welcome diminution of fear, there is free discussion at last in the centers of power (there is even talk about dropping the word “socialist” from the official name of the state), but as of September 1990, there

were as yet no economic earthquakes, no privatization of the kolkhozes and sovkhozes, no selling of state property, no abolition of artificial pricing, no free market, no political independence for four victims of the Molotov-Ribbentrop conspiracy, the four Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Moldavia. The infrastructure of Sovietism is still intact.

If we are to take Brzezinski's warning seriously, we should be concerned that it is the social democrats and not the conservatives who are ascending to power in East Central Europe, and that conservatives there receive the same treatment in the media (including the American media) that was meted out to American conservatives in the 1950s. Yet the American right, while bemoaning the inroads which left-wing ideologies have made into the American academic world and public life, is uninterested in patient and long-term work of cooperation with, and moral support for, those forces in East Central Europe which struggle against similar adversaries. The American right would perhaps pay attention if the ideas of conservatives from other parts of the world were elegantly translated, tantalizingly seasoned and served on a silver platter at the right temperature and at the right time. The American conservatives are not interested in spending time and effort to learn something about countries which do not belong to Western Europe but which have absorbed enough of European civilization to become contestants in the worldwide effort to save something of this civilization. The American right shows interest in Russia and Germany because these countries are perceived as powerful. In doing so, American right plays straight into the hands of those who accuse conservatives of being interested not in ideas but only in power, in "how many divisions does so-and-so have." The American right has lost one of the key ingredi-

ents of Western culture: the proselytizing attitude, something that the Left has preserved so well.

Which now brings me to the third part of this comment, the speculative one. It seems to me that in a perverted sort of way, socialism, both in its Marxist variety and in the social democratic one, is a product of the Western way of thinking and of the Western way of doing things. It is a manifestation of that urge to proselytize and to improve things which has been a key ingredient of Western culture. It is an important ingredient, and it is only superficially at odds with another one, which can be described as an ability to live in the present and not to strive for some utopian future. That the two are not contradictory is evident in the activities of Mother Theresa, who is certainly a mover and shaker if there ever was one, while at the same time being the sort of person who does her job without feverishly planning for a perfectly shaped tomorrow. While the right has lost the first characteristic, the left has lost the second.

I have some hope that the East Central European nations presently emerging from Sovietism will be able once more to cultivate both attributes of Western culture, because it is the combination of both that has made this culture so resilient and worthwhile. However, for that to happen, the social democrats and the Marxist Socialists in these countries need to be counterbalanced by conservatives. If the social democrats win an intellectual monopoly in East Central Europe, the chances of such a development would shrink. I therefore hope that vigorous conservative movements will emerge in East Central Europe, and that they would not be discredited ahead of time in the American media by their ideological opponents.

At the same time, as I look at the well-fortified academic bunkers in which representatives of left-wing ideologies re-

side at American and European universities, I realize the enormity of the gap between the principles of thinking and observation taught at these universities, and those practiced by the untutored masses. The man in the street still adheres to some form of logocentrism, while the elites have abandoned it altogether. The following development is therefore possible. The Western cultural elites have always been dynamic and eager to impose their views on the masses. The wandering Greek philosophers spread the Greek world view throughout the Roman Empire; the Church Fathers and philosophers articulated a model of Christian thinking and behavior that was then propagated by schools and churches in the Western world; the Enlightenment philosophers infused European societies with the view that the world is perfectible and can be rationally comprehended.

With the advent of the philosophers of irrationalism in the nineteenth century, a new anti-Enlightenment (not to mention anti-Christian) world view began to form in Western culture. A huge change of *epistemē*, a massive tectonic move that promises the reshaping of the intellectual continents, has been taking place since the times of Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. This world view is still in the making, or rather it has been already formed but is still confined to universities and other elite institutions; it passes on to the larger society in a slow trickle, hampered by many other influences which bear on this society and which cannot be totally eliminated under a democratic system of government. In a sense, the elites are less powerful today than they were centuries ago, when the lack of democratic institutions throughout the Western world made it easier for the intellectual elites to mandate what the thinking of the society would be. Not that those earlier societies were under raw tyranny, but centuries ago, even

parliamentary monarchy such as the one in Great Britain was not averse to practices that would today send a government packing. In other words, the chances of a monopoly in influencing society are smaller today than they have ever been. At some point the elites, impatient with the slowness of change and loath to resort to prayer and fasting (which the Church Fathers used as one of the means of winning friends and influencing people), may withdraw their consent from democratic institutions and opt for the socialist ones. In socialism, strong state control is not exposed to view but is hidden under a gift wrap with a ribbon tied around it, and thus provides a good environment for those who would like to proselytize without enduring serious competition.

It is only under socialism that a speedy imposition on society of the views of present-day elites can occur. Never mind that socialism failed in the past; it could be tried again in a less nationalistic environment and under the umbrella of relative prosperity and security. Under Marxist socialism the state controls all areas of public activity, including schools. Such a monopoly would carry a tantalizing possibility of dropping into the memory hole the old beliefs of Western societies and imposing an appropriately simplified form of a post-modernist *Weltanschauung* on all but the most recalcitrant individuals. There may then develop an undercurrent of sympathy toward some form of Socialism even among those intellectuals who, like the Freudians and the Nietzscheans, are ostensibly removed from any such ideology. Only under Socialism can the remaining logocentrism of the masses be uprooted, because only under Socialism can schools finally become so uniform as not to allow significant dissent from the views of the elites. So, the missionaries of postmodernism could be brought to favor some form of Socialism, even though they might be

mindful of Antonio Gramsci's teaching that this political system is not an historical inevitability but rather a possible result of a difficult work of proselytizing by the elites.

Thus, even though there are many signs point to the contrary, I am not sure that we have already sailed past the Scylla and Charybdis of Socialism. Sovietism is playing dead, but its structures in the Soviet Union have not been dismantled, and many countries still have Marxist socialist governments or substantial pro-socialist minorities.⁶ Social democracy is gaining ground in post-communist East Central Europe, thanks among others to the isolationist tendencies of American conservatives. The big question is, Will the change of the Western *epistemē* continue along the lines marked out by Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Foucault, and Derrida while the post-communist nations of World War II are intimidated into accepting social democracy as the only alternative to Communism? If the answer to this question is "Yes," the obituaries of Socialism may be premature.

— Ewa M. Thompson

¹Alain Besancon, *The Rise of the Gulag: Intellectual Origins of Leninism*, translated by Sarah Matthews

(New York, 1981). ²Richard F. Staar, Editor. *1989 Yearbook of Communist Affairs* (Stanford, CA, 1989). ³Tommaso Ricci, "The Unsinkable Bacon Priest," *30 Days* (May 1990). ⁴Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Failure: the Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1989), p. 9. ⁵Richard F. Staar's "Register of Communist Parties" (*Problems of Communism*, March-April 1990) shows that in 1989, Communist parties still held power in Benin, Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Cambodia, China, North Korea, Laos, Mongolia, Vietnam, Albania, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and the USSR. Worldwide in 1989, a number of Communist parties increased their representation in legislatures. This happened among others in India, Greece, Uruguay, and Sri Lanka. Altogether, under two million new members were gained worldwide. The communist parties claimed a total of 85 million members worldwide, a decline of 6 million from 1988. Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland accounted for most of the losses to Communist parties in 1989. In the 1990 elections, communists won in Bulgaria and a communist-controlled front gained power in Romania, while Serbia remains staunchly Communist in the increasingly restive Yugoslavia. A significant diminution of the size of communist parties in Western Europe is yet to be recorded in national elections. Communists got 9.4% of the vote in Finland in 1987, 11.3% in France in 1988, 10.96% in Greece in 1989, 13.2% in Iceland in 1987, 5.8% in Sweden in 1988, 9.5% in Spain in 1989, 4.1% in the Netherlands in 1989 and 26.6% in Italy in 1987. In the little principality of San Marino, 28.71% of the votes cast in 1988 went to the Communists. See Richard F. Staar, Editor, *1989 Yearbook of Communist Affairs* and *1990 Yearbook of Communist Affairs* (Stanford, Calif., 1990).