The Future of Socialism: II

On Attitudes and Ideas

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Pre-Marxian socialism issued from the marriage of humanitarianism and rationalism. The utopian socialists thought of a continuous revolution: the ideals of liberty and equality to which the bourgeois had appealed in its fight against feudal privilege were to be realized in a socialist commonwealth. Increased confidence in the human reason, also a part of the bourgeois revolution, encouraged them to elaborate plans for the perfect state. To convert the people, only practical demonstration was necessary: hence New Lanark and New Harmony, Brook Farm, Oneida, and the North American Phalanx.

"Reason," wrote Engels, "became the sole measure of everything. . . . Every form of society and government then existing, every old traditional notion was flung into the lumber room as irrational; the world had hitherto allowed itself to be led solely by prejudices; everything in the past deserved only pity and contempt. Now, for the first time, appeared the light of day, the kingdom of reason; henceforth superstition, injustice, privilege, oppression, were to be superseded by eternal truth, eternal right, equality based on nature and the inalienable rights of man."

The ideas of the utopian socialists were put into circulation at the very beginning of the nineteenth century. In spite of these ideas, the first four decades of the century were filled with war, poverty, and oppression. Something had gone wrong, and Marx and Engels, coming to maturity in the forties, were prepared to say what it was. In the first place, they argued, the development of society was not determined by rational theories but by the operation of laws analogous to the laws of physics and chemistry. In the second place, theories were themselves the product of a particular social situation, not the absolute achievement of an unfettered intellect. "The historical situation," Engels stated, "also dominated the founders of socialism. . . . The solution of the social problems, which as yet lay hidden in un-
developed economic conditions, the utopians attempted to evolve out of the human brain."

To understand Marxism, we must understand its genesis. Marx and Engels wanted socialism as intensely as Saint-Simon, Fourier, or Owen, but forty years of utopianism had convinced them of the futility of drawing up “rational” schemes of social organization and attempting to float them by exhortation and example. Imagine, then, the satisfaction they felt when they became convinced that the operation of social and economic laws would inexorably bring about precisely the end they desired. We miss the whole point if we think of them as devitalized scholars probing dispassionately into the laws of social change. They were socialists to begin with, and they found what they wanted to find.

Engels himself lets us see the slightness of the clues that started them on their way to their vast conclusions: “In 1831, the first working-class rising took place in Lyons; between 1838 and 1842, the first national working-class movement, that of the English Chartists, reached its height... The new facts made imperative a new examination of all past history. Then it was seen that all past history, with the exception of its primitive stages, was the history of class struggles.” It was Marx, of course, with his Hegelian training, who made the breathtaking leap to this final generalization. It was not enough for him to find a force—i.e., the proletariat—that could and inevitably would achieve socialism; he had to sanctify this discovery by relating it to an even more sweeping generalization about the dynamics of all history.

The immediate and very desirable effect of Marx's work was to concentrate the attention of socialists on the analysis of social processes. One can refuse to accept the dogma of Marxist infallibility and still be greatly in Marx's debt. If his economic theories are sometimes cloudy, his historical writings are brilliantly clear. The chapter of Capital called “Primary Accumulation” is one of the great examples of his insight. Two other chapters, “The Working Day” and “Capitalist Accumulation,” taken with Engels' earlier Conditions of the Working Class, give an unforgettable account of life in the first stages of industrial capitalism. And such inspired pamphlets as The Civil War in France and The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon take us below the surface to see the forces at work in the political struggles of the mid-nineteenth century.

If, however, Marx's preoccupation with historical processes has given us a great intellectual heritage, it must also be held responsible for certain of the vital shortcomings of organized socialism. Marx and Engels ridiculed the speculations of the utopians. They were "scientific" socialists, and it was beneath their dignity to try to read the future. They were content to demonstrate that capitalism must decay and that the proletariat must come to power. They did point out that, since there would be no class for the proletariat to exploit, it would be forced to create a classless society, but they were so frightened of utopianism that they refused to think about the transition from the socialist revolution to the perfect socialist state. Lenin, for somewhat different reasons, was quite as hostile to speculation, and when, on the verge of the Russian Revolution, he paused to ask himself what might be expected if the revolution succeeded, he could only reaffirm the original Marxist abstractions. The State and Revolution has its sharp insights, but one cannot help feeling that it is primarily a plea for faith. Lenin was too much of a realist not to know that vast disorders would accompany and follow the revolution, and he wanted to strengthen his comrades by convincing them that their goal would eventually and inevitably be won.

This refusal to be concerned with the character of socialist society has had extraordinary consequences in the decades since the Russian Revolution. Marx and Engels taught that if the first step were taken—the expropriation of the expropriators, the socialization of the means of production—all other things would follow. Since the Bolsheviks did socialize the means of production, orthodox Marxists were bound to conclude that the Soviet Union was a socialist state and could not help but develop into a classless society. Hence not only have the Stalinists justified every phase of Soviet foreign and domestic policy; the Trotskyites, after criticizing Soviet policy from top to bottom, have insisted on the defense of the socialist fatherland. Moreover, countless liberals and progressives, many of them perfectly sincere, have persisted, despite repeated disillusionment, in the belief that Russia is somehow on their side.

There is a kind of double inflexibility in the Marxist-Leninist tradition. There is, first, the simple and obvious inflexibility that leads Stalinists and some other self-styled Marxists to regard as heresy any questioning of any part of the Marxist canon. But there is also a subtler and less commonly recognized type of inflexibility: it is "un-Marxian" to state explicitly the ends of socialism and thus make them a usable criterion of socialist actions. If Stalinists are asked how they can be sure that the means they employ will lead to the ends they desire, they insist that they are interested not in means and ends but
in historical processes. Unfortunately the idea of the inevitability of socialism fits in with the idea of progress—of which it is, of course, a special variation—and thus it happens that many men of good will accept the dogma almost as readily as the Stalinists themselves. They believe, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, that the whole world is progressing toward socialism—not merely socialism in the sense of the government ownership of the means of production, but socialism in the sense of the just, equal, peaceful, fruitful, good society.

If nearly thirty years of socialized production has not achieved the ultimate ends of socialism in Russia, and if, as many of us have been forced to conclude, the movement of Russian society is away from justice, equality, freedom, and peace, not toward them, then certainly the case for the inevitability of socialism ought to be re-examined. And if we decide that Marx was wrong, we should also re-examine our goals and the means by which we propose to reach them.

II

This is not the place in which to discuss Marxist economics, and for our purposes it does not matter much whether or not the theory of surplus value is fallacious. There are, however, three main Marxist contentions to be scrutinized: that capitalism is bound sooner or later to collapse; that the proletariat is the inevitable heir of capitalism; that the proletariat will establish a classless society.

So far as the collapse of capitalism is concerned, we may as well dodge the question of its inevitability and content ourselves with asking what has happened in the years since Marx’s prophesies were made. It seems clear enough that capitalism, certainly the capitalism of the classical economists, is dying. In every country of the world larger and larger areas of the economic life have been taken away from private enterprise. Revolution in the Marxist sense has taken place only in Russia, but socialization, in varying degrees, has taken place everywhere. From the strict Marxist point of view, this socialization is merely a capitalist dodge, but it seems more accurate to say that it is forced upon the capitalists, who like it only as anyone likes the proverbial half-loaf. Monopoly has increased, as Marx predicted it would, but the victims, instead of banding together to destroy capitalism in toto, have supported measures of control supposed to alleviate the evil. In the same way, severe depressions have occurred in accordance with Marxist theory, but they have been met by large-scale government measures involving the expansion of governmental control. Except in Russia, where capitalism was not far advanced, there has not been a complete capitalist collapse, but in most countries a weakened capitalism shares power with a greatly strengthened government. In Nazi Germany capitalists survived only as they came to terms with men whose power was political rather than financial, and British capitalists may find themselves in the same position. Only in this country is finance capital strong enough to challenge government directly, and even here finance capital was on the defensive for fourteen years. To try to explain away these facts by calling government the tool of the capitalists is to miss the significance of a far-reaching historical trend.

As for the proletariat, the fact is clear that it has not come to power as a result of capitalist decay. In Germany, in the early thirties, capitalism was perilously weak, and there were strong parties that claimed to lead the proletariat in the name of Karl Marx; but power came into the hands of a relatively small group of persons, most of them lower-middle-class intellectuals. What is even more significant, the group that holds power in the Soviet Union, though of course it claims to rule in the interests of the laboring masses, is only less remote from the proletariat than was the Tsarist aristocracy. Not only does this group enjoy a multitude of privileges; it controls a vast machinery for imposing its will on the majority of the people. Many of its members are not proletarians in their origins, and they are not proletarian in their way of life or their interests.

As a disillusioned Belgian Marxist, Henry de Man, pointed out more than twenty years ago, Marx shaped his conception of the working class to fit the role it was required to play in his scheme of things. Look at the picture of the proletarian in the Communist Manifesto: he has no property; he has no family life; he has been “stripped of every trace of national character”; to him, law, morality, and religion are “just so many bourgeois prejudices.” This is not the worker we have known in America, nor can it be argued that such a proletarian as Marx describes has ever or anywhere been representative. Moreover, it is doubtful if a completely degraded proletariat would be capable of making a revolution. Revolutionary leadership, as a rule, has come either from the middle class or from the upper strata of the proletariat, not from those workers who are most exploited.

There is a vast amount of discontent in the world, but it is not peculiar to the proletariat, and it is not merely economic in its origins. To be sure, there is dissatisfaction with economic conditions, but it is
augmented by all sorts of psychological and moral discontents. Recent studies have indicated that factory workers are troubled by the meaninglessness of their work as much as by low pay, and that unions are important not only as they improve working conditions but also because they give the individual member a sense of purpose. The dissatisfaction of the German middle class, which played so large a part in the rise of Nazism, can be attributed to frustrations that were in considerable degree noneconomic. To many persons, probably including most of the readers of this article, the values of capitalism are morally unacceptable even when the capitalist system is economically at its peak. In short, the revolutionary forces in the contemporary world do not grow exclusively out of economic exploitation, and it cannot be assumed that the proletariat is the only revolutionary class or even that the proletariat as a whole is a revolutionary class.

The proletariat is not certain or even likely to come to power as capitalism collapses. Observation shows that the usual consequence of the breakdown of capitalism is the strengthening of the state. But where, in the strengthened state, does power reside? "The politically dominant class," wrote de Man, "is the one whose members exercise the functions of political domination"—in other words, the bureaucrats and the politicians.

In The Managerial Revolution James Burnham recognized the growing power of the bureaucrats and politicians in the post-capitalist world, but both he and de Man, who in some ways anticipated him, tried to fit this phenomenon into a modified Marxist system. Burnham's acceptance of the Marxist ideology leads him to speak of the managerial class, but the managers are not a class in the Marxist sense. It is better to discard the whole Marxist terminology and to admit that the collapse of capitalism has brought consequences unforeseen by Marx. As Toynbee points out, the rise of nationalism is no less important in the history of Western civilization than the rise of capitalism. As capitalism has failed to keep its promises, people have turned to the national state, with the consequent rise of the demagogue and the manipulator. It is instructive that the leader of one of the two great totalitarian powers was a demagogue par excellence while the leader of the other is the adroitness of political bosses.

In the face of these facts, talk of the inevitability of the classless society becomes nonsense. Even if such a thing as a thoroughly class-conscious and united proletariat could exist, it would have to administer the state through the medium of bureaucrats and politicians. ("Persons who do not wish to have any bureaucrats," de Man wrote, "should not set up offices. If the masses want to engage in political activities, they must have politicians.") So far as the Marxist scheme of things is concerned, there is nothing the proletariat can do to control the politicians and bureaucrats. Lenin, it is true, did try to provide a kind of check by limiting the salaries of functionaries to the level of wages paid skilled labor, but this check did not last long, and today the luxuries enjoyed by Communist Party functionaries are a cause for scandal not only in the Soviet Union but also, since World War II, in satellite countries such as Yugoslavia. Politicians and bureaucrats, in other words, behave like politicians and bureaucrats, not like the heroes of some proletarian novel.

Nearly thirty years ago Spengler predicted that the socialism toward which the world was moving would resemble "not Marx's theory but Frederick William I's Prussian practice which long preceded Marx and will yet displace him." In our time we have seen the authoritarian state arrived at by the Communist route and by the fascist route, and if we can discern any general historical tendency, it is a trend toward totalitarianism.

III

If we do not wish to be swept along by the tendency toward totalitarianism, we must become naysayers. To begin with, we had better get rid of any remnants of belief in progress. My generation was brought up on the straight Victorian idea of progress—"the progress of mankind onward and upward forever," as the Unitarians phrase it. Many of us were weaned away from this belief in the period after World War I, both by experience and by exposure to European pessimism. In the thirties, however, we fell for the Marxian version of the idea. Marxism does not affirm the idea of progress as such, and the concept of dialectical materialism allows for ups and downs, but Marxism, as I have pointed out, does assert that impersonal historical forces will inevitably achieve the good society. This is the notion we must put aside. I think we must develop a theory of history that rests on firmer foundations than dialectical materialism, but whether we do that or not, the facts of the present situation force us to abandon the myth of inevitability.

In the second place, and more concretely, we shall have to view with skepticism any program that advocates the socialization of the means of production without simultaneously proposing practical measures for the control of the bureaucracy that socialization makes nec-
essary. I do not think that such measures can be easily devised, for more is at stake than the holding of elections and plebiscites, and genuinely popular participation in government becomes more difficult as government becomes more deeply involved in economic affairs. We cannot take a dogmatic stand against the nationalization of basic industries or even against large-scale socialization, for socialization may be preferable to the chaos of an unplanned economy or the tyranny of monopoly control; but we can refuse to deceive ourselves about the consequences. The prevention of evil is one thing; the creation of good is another.

Discussions of the problem of ends and means frequently assume that both means and ends are simple, isolated entities. In practice, however, human ends are never simple, and they are never fully stated and, for that matter, never fully understood. Furthermore, any human act has not one but many consequences. Those who insist that the end justifies the means and those who condemn certain means as absolutely wrong are guilty of the same error. Our task is to discover, as well as we can amid all the complexities and contingencies of human society, the means that will achieve the ends we desire. In particular we must recognize that an action may be necessary without being good. It may have been necessary—I think it was—to meet the force of German fascism with armed force, but it was folly to believe that the successful suppression of Nazism would, in itself, produce peace or democracy. Persons who are concerned with achieving mass action naturally invoke as many sanctions as possible, and raise all kinds of hope, careless of the disillusionment that will certainly follow. Marxists are peculiarly guilty on this score, since they are committed to the idea of doing evil that good may come. We must avoid this confusion, and yet our clear perception of the consequences of evil actions must not lead us into the paralysis of absolutism. Rather we should do what has to be done, but without self-deception. Though destruction may be a prerequisite, a good society can only be the result of creative effort.

If this seems to be a rather bleak view of our dilemma, so much the better. Many Leftists are so afraid of being called pessimists that they fail to reckon with the difficulties of their tasks and thus doom themselves to defeat. The kind of optimism that is worked up in Communist and neo-liberal circles makes straight thinking impossible. That is why the writings of certain religious authors—Toynbee, Niebuhr, Eliot—are so often more impressive than the writings of radicals and liberals. Orthodox Christianity at the very least presents a

view of human nature that is not flagrantly at odds with the facts we have experienced in these recent decades.

It is unnecessary, however, to accept the dogma of original sin in order to explain the human predicament. Human beings, as a rule, have not reached a state of development suitable for living in a complex world society. This is a matter of everybody’s observation and experience. The more one knows of the men who are running the world’s affairs, the more clearly one sees that they are not up to the job they are trying to do. As for the intellectuals, their writings testify daily to their sense of their own inadequacy. Nor is this state of affairs surprising. Mankind required hundreds of thousands of years to reach the stage of social and technical development that we know as civilization. Moreover, even in the six thousand years or so since the race emerged from the stone age, the majority of people have lived in small communities and under conditions that changed but little in a lifetime. It is no wonder that we have difficulty in coping with a constantly changing technology and the system of worldwide economic relationships it has created. It will take time for men to learn to think and act as members of a world society, and there may not be time enough.

All this is a commonplace, but it is the kind of commonplace many intellectuals find it convenient to ignore. I do not say that Western civilization is doomed, for I do not know and I think no one else does, but it is fatuous not to take the possibility of failure into account. One of the things that make so many radicals seem superficial and even silly is their conviction that a remedy can be found for any evil if they succeed in working up enough excitement. I know that skepticism may be an excuse for doing nothing, but we do not have to be pushed into foolish actions just because some people are smug. The neo-liberals tell us that it is later than we think, but that makes it all the more important for us not to waste time in doing the wrong things.

IV

In their preliminary statement the editors of PARTISAN REVIEW assume that there can be—and, indeed, is—such a thing as a non-socialist Left. Of course they are right, but how, then, are we to define Leftism? Are we to say that nonsocialist Leftists are merely individuals who once embraced socialism in some form or other, have since rejected it, but refuse to surrender the name of Leftist though they have given up the substance? Many of the persons who think of themselves or are
thought of by the editors of Partisan Review as unaffiliated Leftists were at one time Communists or Communist sympathizers, for Communism swept through a whole generation with devastating effect. What these Leftists have in common, however, is not the fact that they are ex-Communists but rather certain attitudes that made them susceptible to Communism in the first place. That is, they are united in their profound dissatisfaction with existing society, in their realization that not only the intellectuals but all classes of people suffer from the defects of the social order, in their adherence to conceptions of the good life that have been evolved in the course of mankind's six thousand years of experience with civilization, and in their sense of personal responsibility for present and future. On some such basis a group of unaffiliated Leftists, some of whom continue to call themselves socialists and some of whom do not, can be clearly distinguished.

This kind of Leftism rests ultimately on a conception of what is right and what is wrong. The superficial Victorian idea of morality has been so thoroughly overhauled by anthropology, psychology, and Marxian economics and history that the very word is discredited, but you only have to pick up any piece of Left propaganda, from the Manifesto to the latest election leaflet of either the Communists or the Socialists, to see how dependent Leftists have been and are on a moral appeal. The strength of socialism—in the most comprehensive sense of the term—has always been a moral strength. It has not only denounced the oppressors as immoral; it has buoyed up the morale—significant word—of the oppressed by saying, "The right is on your side."

Yet Marx's skepticism about the moral appeal has its justification. The bourgeois revolutionaries talked with the most pious fervor about moral standards, but when they had won the economic and political advantages they were seeking, many of them were able to forget that their moral aims had not been realized. The formulation and certainly the application of moral standards, Marx saw, were bound to be influenced by self-interest and class-interest. But instead of trying to discover how material interests and ideas of right and wrong interacted, he based his theories on class-interest while remaining in practice an indignantly moral man and appealing to the morality of his contemporaries.

One of the principal tasks for unaffiliated Leftists today is the rehabilitation of morality. Marx is by no means solely responsible for our moral confusion, but his guilt is large. While availing himself of all the moral prestige that utopian socialism, the bourgeois revolution,
Macdonald says, and toward anarchism. He may become a martyr, and he is at any rate a gadfly.

The critical liberal is no less aware than the intransigent radical of the deficiencies of existing systems, and he probably does not quarrel fundamentally with the radical in his conception of the good society. However, he thinks the possible is worth achieving, even though it may fall short of the desirable. Critical liberalism has nothing except a few phrases in common with the neo-liberalism of the New Republic and PM, and, as the late Morris Cohen demonstrated in both theory and practice, it has only an historical connection with the laissez-faire liberalism of the nineteenth century. It does, however, claim descent from the great body of “reasonable” reformers in the past. Although the critical liberal is aware of the limitations of reason, he sees reason as our best reliance. What the critical liberal lacks in the way of dramatic boldness, he can make up for by persistence.

In choosing between intransigent radicalism and critical liberalism, the individual is likely to be influenced by temperament. The dangers of each position are obvious. Committed to actual or at least apparent ineffectiveness, and isolated by his fanaticism from the majority of mankind, the radical may lapse into a schizoid existence. The liberal, on the other hand, may come to regard compromise as an end in itself, and may succumb to the lethargy and smugness that have brought so much discredit on the name of liberalism. Neither of the two positions, however, can be condemned because of the excesses to which it may lead. In their best expressions the two attitudes complement each other, and both can contribute to an effective Left.

There is one consideration that is important, though it may not be decisive. One of the many evils of our society is the gulf that exists between intellectuals and nonintellectuals. This is an evil for the intellectuals and for society as a whole. Intransigent radicalism widens that gulf, for the behavior of the radical bewilders and antagonizes people, and the radical never has a chance to find out why other people act as they do. Critical liberalism, on the other hand, at least provides a basis for co-operation, since liberals are never indifferent to the possible and are willing to work with people as they find them. If the individual believes, as I have come to believe, that communication between intellectuals and nonintellectuals is badly needed, he is likely to feel strongly the advantages of liberalism.

The clarification of attitudes seems to me more important at the moment than the discussion of organizations. I should like to see a new party, unqualifiedly democratic, unsparingly critical of the evils of capitalism but not committed to socialist dogmas, genuinely imaginative in its plans for social reorganization. Our immediate concern, however, is with attitudes and ideas. If we can clear away some of the moral and political confusion, a new party, if one is born, may amount to something.