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Reflections on the Crisis of Communist Regimes

The massacre in Tiananmen Square last June is unlikely to be the last violent expression of the deep and multiple crises—economic, social, political, ethnic, ideological, moral—which grip many Communist regimes, and which will in due course most probably grip them all. A vast 'mutation' is going on throughout the Communist world, and undoubtedly constitutes one of the great turning points in the history of the twentieth century. The outcome of this crisis is still an open question, though the alternatives, broadly speaking, are not difficult to list: at best, a form of regime approximating to socialist democracy, which the reform movement initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union may manage to produce; some form of capitalist democracy, with a substantial public sector; or a reinforced authoritarianism with a spreading market economy—what Boris Kagarlitsky has aptly called 'market Stalinism'—of which China is the most conspicuous example to date. At any rate, it seems clear that the form of regime which dominated the Soviet Union from the late twenties until a very few years ago, and all other Communist

regimes from the post-war years onwards, is now unravelling in many of them, and is very likely sooner or later to unravel in them all.

We know what this immense historic process is taken to mean by the enemies of socialism everywhere: not only the approaching demise of Communist regimes and their replacement by capitalist ones, but the elimination of any kind of socialist alternative to capitalism. With this intoxicating prospect of the scarcely hoped-for dissipation of an ancient nightmare, there naturally goes the celebration of the market, the virtues of free enterprise, and greed unlimited. Nor is it only on the Right that the belief has grown in recent times that socialism, understood as a radical transformation of the social order, has had its day: apostles of 'new times' on the Left have come to harbour much the same belief. All that is now possible, in the eyes of the 'new realism', is the more humane management of a capitalism which is in any case being thoroughly transformed.

What, on the other hand, does the crisis of the Communist world signify for people who remain committed to the creation of a cooperative, democratic, egalitarian, and ultimately classless society, and who believe that this aspiration can only be given effective meaning in an economy predominantly based on various forms of social ownership? An answer to this question requires first of all a clear perception of what kind of regimes it is that are in crisis: it is only so that lessons may be properly read from their experience.

The Primal Mould

Even though Communist regimes have differed from each other in various ways, they have all had two overriding characteristics in common: an economy in which the means of economic activity were overwhelmingly under state ownership and control; and a political system in which the Communist Party (under different names in different countries), or rather its leaders, enjoyed a virtual monopoly of power, which was vigilantly defended against any form of dissent by systematic—often savage—repression. The system entailed an extreme inflation of state power and, correspondingly, a stifling of all social forces not controlled by, and subservient to, the leadership of the party/state. The 'pluralism' which formed part of the system, and which involved the existence of a large variety of institutions in every sphere of life, from culture to sport, was not at all intended to dilute the power of the party/state, but on the contrary to reinforce it, by turning these institutions into organs of party/state control.

Why these regimes were all set in this mould also requires close attention. To begin with, all of them, by definition, went through a massive revolutionary transformation of their economic, social, political and cultural life. In some cases—Russia, China, North Korea, Vietnam, Yugoslavia, Cuba—the revolution was internally generated. In Eastern and Central Europe, on the other hand, with the exception of Yugoslavia, it was imposed by Soviet command, from above. But whether internally generated or externally imposed, these *were* revolutions, of a very thorough kind, with fundamental changes in property

relations, the elimination of traditional ruling classes, the access to power of previously excluded, marginalized and persecuted people, the complete transformation of state structures, massive changes in the occupational structure, and vast changes (or attempted changes) in the whole national culture.

However they are made, such revolutionary upheavals produce immense and long-lasting national traumas. The point hardly needs emphasis in the year of the bi-centenary of the French Revolution, an upheaval which remains to this day a subject of bitter, passionate debate and political division in France. The traumas are bound to be greatly accentuated if the revolutionary transformation is imposed as a result of external intervention and dictation; and all the more is this certain to be the case where the intervention is that of a foreign power which has traditionally been seen as an enemy. Poland is an obvious case in point. Regimes born in these conditions seldom have much legitimacy; and few Communist regimes were in fact viewed as legitimate in the eyes of a majority of their citizens.

Moreover, the problems which faced the new regimes were, in all Communist countries, aggravated by three crucially important factors. First, the revolutions were engineered or imposed in countries which, with the exception of Czechoslovakia and to a lesser degree East Germany (which became the German Democratic Republic in 1949), were at a low level of development, in some cases at an abysmally low level of economic development. This meant, among other things, that the revolution did not inherit the fruits of economic maturation: on the contrary, the revolution was turned into a means of economic development, and was therefore associated with a painful and arduous process, slow to yield beneficial results. This would have been bad enough; but, secondly, Communist regimes faced conditions of war and civil war, foreign intervention, huge losses of life and appalling material destruction. Korea and Vietnam were involved in a major war with the United States, and subjected to murderously destructive saturation bombing; and Cuba, for its part, has endured a debilitating boycott and other forms of hostile intervention on the part of the United States.

Again, there is the scarcely negligible fact that, save for Czechoslovakia, hardly any Communist regime had had any previous experience of effective democratic forms. The European states which became Communist regimes had all previously had strong near-authoritarian or actually authoritarian regimes, with very weak civil societies, in which the state, allied to semi-feudal ruling classes, had enjoyed great power and used it to exploit and oppress largely peasant populations. As for Communist regimes in Asia, and the revolutionary regime in Cuba, they had all previously been either colonial, or semi-colonial, or dependent countries, subject to oppressive external or indigenous rule, or both.

These are not the conditions in which anything resembling socialist democracy could be expected to flourish. Yet, all these factors do not adequately explain why Communist regimes, with the notable

exception of Yugoslavia after 1948, never made any serious attempt, or indeed any attempt at all, to break the authoritarian mould in which they had been cast at their birth. Neither Nikita Khrushchev's reforms nor Mao Tse-tung's Cultural Revolution constituted any such break: top-down and monopolistic rule remained unimpaired in the Soviet Union, in China and everywhere else in the Communist world. Their rulers might well argue that the circumstances of their birth had determined the character of their rule in the early years of the regime; and that they had continued thereafter to face very difficult conditions, capitalist hostility and the constrictions of the Cold War. But all this can hardly serve to explain the fact that at no time throughout the life of these regimes had their rulers felt impelled to seek a genuine relaxation of their rule in democratic directions.

State and Society

Conservative ideologists have a simple explanation of this immobility: its roots are to be found in Marxism. In fact, Marxism has nothing to do with it. At the very core of Marx's thought, there is the insistence that socialism, not to speak of communism, entails the subordination of the state to society; and even the dictatorship of the proletariat, in Marx's perspective, must be taken to mean all but unmediated popular rule. In the unlikely event of their wishing to find textual ideological inspiration for their form of rule, Communist leaders would have sought in vain in the many volumes of Marx's and Engels's Collected Works for such inspiration. Least of all would they have found any notion of single-party monopolistic rule. They might have fared rather better with Lenin's Collected Works, but even this would have required a very selective reading and a refusal to take seriously Lenin's strictures against the 'bureaucratic deformation' of Communist rule. The real architect of the model of the rule which came to prevail in all Communist regimes was in fact Stalin, who first established it in the Soviet Union, and then had it copied by other Communist leaders nurtured in his school, or imposed it on the countries which came under his control after World War Two.

However, Stalin died in 1953, and it is not reasonable to attribute to his malign power the reason why Communist leaders chose to cling to authoritarian patterns of rule. The reason for it lies in the simple fact that it suited extremely well the people who ran the system and who came to constitute a large state bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie nurtured in the *nomenklatura*, and enjoying considerable power and privilege. No doubt, the motives of the people concerned were very mixed —certainly personal advantage, but also a kind of authoritarian paternalism, a fear of what loosening up might do not only to their position but to the nature of the regime, even a genuine belief that this *was* socialism, and that they were defending it against its many internal and external enemies.

But whatever the motives of those who led these regimes, their rule constituted an awful perversion of socialism. This is not to deny them various advances and achievements in economic and social terms; but it needs to be said, most of all by socialists, that they did nevertheless

contradict in a multitude of fundamental ways the democratic and egalitarian promise of socialism. Communist regimes were, and most of them remain what, some considerable time ago, I called the Soviet Union—oligarchical collectivist regimes.[1]

It is in their authoritarian nature, I believe, that must above all be sought the reason for the crisis which has engulfed them. For their lack of democracy and of civic freedoms has affected every aspect of their life, from economic performance to ethnic strife. It has been Mikhail Gorbachev's immense merit to have seen and proclaimed that the essential and imperative remedy for the parlous state to which the Soviet Union had been brought was democracy, and to have sought to act upon that perception. *Perestroika* came from above. But it did not come all by itself, out of the unprompted wishes and impulses of an inspired leader. It was in fact engendered by the need to enlist the cooperation and support of a population whose cynicism about its leaders had brought about a profound economic, social and political crisis. The same cynicism and alienation are at work in other Communist regimes. This may not result in *perestroika*, Soviet style, or take the forms which it has already produced in Hungary and Poland. But it is very unlikely to leave any Communist regime unaffected.

Lessons of the Communist Experience

What lessons, then, does the Communist experience hold for Western socialists? It would of course be easy to say that it is entirely irrelevant, given the very different conditions which Western socialists confront in advanced capitalist countries with capitalist-democratic regimes. But to say this would be much too easy. How could an experience extending over some seventy years, lived under the name of socialism, however unwarranted the label, be dismissed as irrelevant and of no account? At the very least, it might point to what is *not* to be done—for instance, in regard to planning and the organization of economic life.

However, the really important lessons to be learnt by socialists from Communist experience lie elsewhere than in the realm of techniques: by far the most important of these lessons has to do with the subject of democracy. For a start, it is clear that the character of Communist rule has greatly helped to give plausibility to a claim which has been one of the most effective items in the conservative repertoire, namely that socialism was inherently authoritarian and oppressive, and that capitalism alone was capable of providing freedom and democratic rule. One of the great triumphs of dominant classes in the West has been their appropriation of democracy, at least in rhetoric and propaganda; and it can hardly be doubted that Communist practices, from elections with 99.9 per cent majorities to the brutal suppression of dissent, have been of the greatest help in the achievement of that appropriation. The simple fact of the matter is that capitalist democracy, for all its crippling limitations, has been immeasurably less oppressive and a lot more democratic than any Communist regime,

[1] 'Stalin and After', in *The Socialist Register 1973*, London 1973.

whatever the latter's achievements in economic, social and other fields. Communist regimes might legitimately claim that they encouraged a far greater degree of participation in organs of power than did bourgeois democracy; but the claim was rendered spurious by the subordination of these organs to strict party and state control, with little (or no) real autonomy.

The experience of Communist regimes therefore forces upon Western socialists the need for further and deeper reflection on the exercise of power. There are, in this connection, two different issues which tend to get mixed up and which need to be disentangled. Marxists and other revolutionary socialists have always insisted that bourgeois democracy is fundamentally vitiated by the class context in which it functions, and by the degree to which the whole democratic process is undermined by the visible and the invisible power which capitalist interests and conservative forces are able to deploy vis-à-vis society and the state. Bourgeois democracy, in a context of class domination, is more often than not turned into an instrument of that domination, and also provides dominant classes with a precious element of legitimation. Also, bourgeois democracy is corrupted by the authoritarian practices to which governments in capitalist societies frequently resort; and it is vulnerable to abrogation when democratic forms threaten to turn into a serious challenge to class domination.

All this is one critique of bourgeois democracy which Marxists and others have rightly made. There is, however, a different critique, which complements the first one, and which is, in some ways, even more fundamental. This is that the kind of representative and parliamentary system which is an essential part of bourgeois democracy is *in any case*, and whatever its context, undemocratic, and that socialism requires more direct forms of expression of popular sovereignty and democratic power. Representation, in this mode of thinking, is inevitably misrepresentation, and perpetuates the alienation of the mass of people from political power which it is the purpose of socialism to overcome. Some degree of representation may be unavoidable; but it should be kept to the barest minimum, with representatives constantly and vigilantly supervised by their constituents, and subject to frequent election and recall.

This radical alternative to representative democracy is outlined in Marx's *The Civil War in France*, written as a defence and celebration of the Paris Commune, and even more specifically in Lenin's *The State and Revolution*, written on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution. Such a system, Lenin said in a bitter polemic with Karl Kautsky, was 'a million times more democratic' than bourgeois democracy could ever be. Yet, it is of great significance that, by the time the claim was made, in 1919, the soviet or council system, which had emerged in the February Revolution, had all but withered, with the soviets under the ever more strict tutelage of the Communist Party.[2] Nor has it ever been resurrected; and 'council communism' has flourished nowhere else in the

[2] Soviets had of course emerged much earlier as well—in the 1905 Revolution. Originally, they were viewed with suspicion by Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

Communist world, not surprisingly since it so greatly contradicts the party dictatorship which has been the essence of Communist rule. Equally significantly, 'council communism' has had no substantial resonance in any capitalist-democratic regime. As a project, it remains what it has been since the Bolshevik Revolution—a marginal movement whose proponents constitute a small and barely audible voice in labour and socialist ranks.

This is not likely to change. Social democrats have always, and ever more emphatically, tended to accept bourgeois democracy as being synonymous with democracy *tout court*, and have shown very little concern with its limitations; and social democratic leaders have in recent times been particularly emphatic in their celebration of it. Western Communist leaders for their part have been more critical, but they have nevertheless long been wholly committed to its essential mechanisms.

Socialism and Democracy

So too is it notable that the constitutional reforms which have occurred in the Soviet Union, Poland and Hungary, have involved the rejuvenation of representative legislatures, issued from newly competitive electoral systems. The trend is likely to continue, and to spread. All reform movements everywhere, not only in Communist regimes, but in previously authoritarian regimes of the Right as well, as in Latin America, tend in the direction of what might be called traditional representative government. For the relevant future, which is likely to extend over a considerable period of time, socialists will have to wage their battles within the confines of this system. What, concretely, does this mean?

First, it means full participation in electoral, representative struggles at local, regional and national levels. It will immediately be said that this is a sure recipe for 'parliamentary cretinism', unprincipled compromise, the opportunistic dilution of programme and purpose. These are real dangers; but even if the dangers cannot be fully overcome, they may at least be greatly attenuated by a democratic, open, responsive party life, with leaders and representatives truly accountable to the members of the organizations which had made their election possible. Nor of course does participation in representative institutions exclude extra-parliamentary and extra-institutional struggles wherever such struggles are to be waged. It is idle to pretend that, even in the best of circumstances, and even with saintly good will all round, a real tension can be avoided between the demands of politics within the framework of representative democracy, and the demands of socialist principle. The alternative, amply demonstrated by long experience, is for parties intent upon radical change to remain confined in a very narrow political space.

The second point is that, together with their involvement in the system, socialists have to conduct a permanent critique of the limitations and shortcomings of bourgeois democracy, of its narrowness and formalism, of its authoritarian tendencies and practices. Such a critique

must bear on existing constitutional, electoral and political arrangements; but it also has to be directed at the hierarchical and oppressive aspects of daily life in a social order based on exploitation and domination. In other words, it is not only political arrangements which need sustained and convincing criticism; but also the exercise of arbitrary power in all walks of life—in factories, offices, schools and wherever else power affects people's lives. The notion that the battle for democracy has already been won in capitalist-democratic systems, save for some electoral and constitutional reforms at the edges, simply by virtue of the achievement of universal suffrage, open political competition and regular elections, is a profoundly limiting and debilitating notion, which has served conservative forces extremely well, and which has to be exposed and countered.

The question, however, is from what standpoint it should be exposed and countered. For many Marxists, past and present, the answer has seemed very simple. Of course, they would say, one has to function within the context of bourgeois democracy, but by having as little to do as possible with formal, electoral, cretinism-inducing procedures. The important thing was to concentrate on class struggle at the point of production, and beyond; and at some point, the class struggle would reach a moment of extreme crisis, out of the deepening and irresoluble contradictions of capitalism, and this would present the revolutionary, vanguard party with the opportunities for which it had been preparing itself over the years and decades. The moment of revolution would have arrived, the bourgeois state would be smashed, and the dictatorship of the proletariat would be proclaimed, on the basis of workers' councils and genuine as opposed to fake popular power.

The weakness of this perspective is not only that it has so far proved to be quite unrealistic, or that, as I have suggested, it has tended to ghettoize its proponents, but rather that it holds no promise whatever of avoiding the degeneration into authoritarianism which has befallen all Communist regimes. For it should be obvious that, however much an old state may be 'smashed', a new state, which really *is* a state, will have to replace it; and neither proclamations of its democratic credentials, nor even the good intentions of its controllers, will resolve the huge problems posed by the democratic exercise of power, particularly when vast changes in the social order are being implemented.

Checks on Power

To tackle these problems requires that attention be paid to some quite ancient propositions. Of these, none is more important than the proposition that only power can check power. Such checking power has to occur both within the state, and also from the outside. Within the state, it involves mechanisms which Communist regimes, to their immense detriment, have spurned: the checking of the executive and the administration by an effective legislature; the independence of the judiciary; the strict and independent control of police powers; the curbing and control of official discretion. Such devices could not properly operate in Communist systems, given the superior and supreme allegiance owed by all state organs to the Party and its leaders. In the

light of this imperative requirement, it would have been idle to expect a legislative assembly to take seriously its formal constitutional powers. So too would it have been unreasonable to expect judges to make decisions that appeared to contradict what was wanted higher up.

This is not to imply that checks and balances are particularly effective in capitalist-democratic regimes, or even that they necessarily serve desirable purposes. It is only to argue that the checking of executive, administrative and police power—indeed all forms of power—is an intrinsic part of the politics of socialist democracy. Such politics cannot entail the wholesale rejection of traditional liberal principles in the conduct of government, but rather their radical extension, far beyond anything that was ever dreamt of by liberal thinkers. This means a fostering of many centres of power outside the state, in a system of autonomous and independent associations, groupings, parties and lobbies of every kind and description, expressing a multitude of concerns and aspirations woven in the tissue of society. Such pluralism can only flower in a regime where 'bourgeois freedoms' are fully guaranteed and extended, and vigilantly defended by a free press and other media, and from many other sources as well. Socialist democracy, on this view, is a system of 'dual power', in which state power and popular power complement each other, but also check each other.

Here too, it is as well to acknowledge that all this constitutes a difficult and fraught enterprise. But the whole experience of Communist regimes suggests that, in socialist terms, there is no other way. There is always bound to be a tension between what are perceived to be the needs of government by those who are in charge of it, and the claims of democracy. The crucial lesson which Communist regimes teach is that the attempt to resolve that tension by sacrificing the claims of democracy to what are taken to be the needs of government is self-defeating. What one ends up with is bad government and no democracy. What is required is the maintenance of a balance between these conflicting claims—a difficult and precarious enterprise, but an essential one.

There is also a very different dimension to socialist democracy, related to the previous one, but which is never given the requisite attention and concern: this is that socialism stands, or should by definition stand, for *humane rule*. A good many years ago, in 1965, in the course of a series of interviews with Bertrand Russell for television, I asked him what he thought of Lenin. 'Lenin was a cruel man', he said, with great emphasis on the word 'cruel'. I then thought that this was an odd comment, not only because Lenin, from all accounts, was not a cruel man, but because the focus on *this* trait, true or false, seemed rather strange, irrelevant. But the concern with cruelty *is* of crucial importance. Political leaders may or may not be personally cruel. But the governments which they lead or of which they are members do many evil and cruel things, and tolerate, encourage and cover up many cruel actions, great and small, always of course in the name of democracy, freedom, national security, socialism, or whatever.

In the presidential campaign the Republican Party waged in the Fall

of 1988—a campaign notable for the demagogic and unscrupulous depths which it plumbed—George Bush also spoke of his desire to see 'a gentler and kinder America'. Whoever wrote these particular lines for him had the right idea. Capitalist societies are inherently incapable of bringing the idea to fruition; but it should figure very high on the socialist agenda, and be seen to be very high on its agenda. One of the worst aspects of Communist regimes has been their seeming indifference, in practice, to humane values, their bureaucratic insensitivity, their resort to arbitrary action. It would not do to overlook the appalling cruelties which their bourgeois counterparts have often perpetrated. But bourgeois politicians in capitalist-democratic regimes have been constrained in their actions by the political framework in which they have had to act, at least—and the qualification is very large—in relation to their own citizens. Communist regimes, on the other hand, have been far less constrained, or all too often hardly constrained at all, and have had ample scope for acting in arbitrary, oppressive and cruel ways. Governments, of whatever kind, can never be trusted, by their own volition, to act decently. Socialist democracy would make it one of its main tasks to build strong barriers against their acting otherwise.

There are a good many socialists who will treat this whole line of argument with the deepest suspicion. They will sternly remind us that revolution is no picnic, and that there are extremely nasty people out there who are implacably determined to prevent at all costs, not excluding *any* means, however foul, the kind of changes in the social order which socialism implies. This is very true. Nowhere is there likely to occur a smooth transition to socialism—on the contrary, the process is bound to be fraught with great dangers and difficulties. But the dangers and difficulties are the more likely to be diminished, the greater the popular support for and involvement in the process. That support, and its resilience and depth, are in large part dependent on the degree to which a socialist movement is able to convince a majority of people that it stands, not only for material improvement and a more rational use of resources than lies within the capacity of capitalism, but also for humane government.

For many years to come, socialists will be something like a pressure group to the left of orthodox social democracy. It is social democracy which will for a long time constitute the alternative—such as it is—to conservative governments. In this perspective, one of the main tasks for socialists is surely to turn themselves into the most resolute and persuasive defenders of the democratic gains which have been achieved in capitalist regimes, the most intransigent critics of the shortcomings of capitalist democracy, and the best advocates of a social order in which democracy is at long last liberated from the constrictions which capitalist domination imposes upon it.

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