

THE FUTURE OF SOCIALISM IN ENGLAND*

by Ralph Miliband

The words 'in England' in the title of this article are intended to denote two things: the first is that it cannot now be taken for granted that what will happen in the English part of the British Isles will also happen in its other parts, and notably in Scotland, with Northern Ireland being a question of an altogether different kind. The future of socialism in England obviously concerns the other parts of the British Isles; but that future does not necessarily and automatically encompass these other parts. This is only to note that we are only at the beginning of a very large process of change in the constitutional organisation of the United Kingdom. This may result in no more than extensive devolution; or it may take a federalist form; or it may result in actual independent statehood for, say Scotland. If enough people in Scotland want independence badly enough, there will be nothing to stop them getting it, nor ought there to be. Socialists in England do not have to support Scottish independence: but they cannot, as socialists, resist a genuine popular demand for it.

The second point about my reference to the future of socialism 'in England' is that the forms it assumes and the struggle towards it cannot but be very greatly influenced and in large measure determined by the specific characteristics of English historical experience. As an advanced capitalist country, England has much in common with other such countries. But there is also much about it which is specific and, using the word in a purely neutral sense, unique—most obviously the fact that the immense transformations of the last three hundred years have occurred within an unbroken—and largely unchallenged—system of parliamentary politics. The political culture which has thereby developed has very deeply influenced the whole character of the labour movement and will continue to affect very considerably the future of socialism in England.

To say this is not to indulge in any kind of parochialism. Nor is it to underestimate the crucial importance and relevance of outside influences and experiences. This would clearly be absurd. Whether in the European

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Economic Community or out, England is now part of the mainland, and the future of English socialism is certainly bound up with the future of socialism elsewhere, and notably in Western Europe. Even so, whatever comes in from outside by way of influence and experience has to be woven in an already thick political and cultural fabric, fashioned over a very long period of time. The point would be too obvious to make if its significance was not often overlooked or underestimated by people on the socialist left.

The questions which need to be asked about the socialist project in England (and it is as well to be quite clear that it ~~is~~ at present a project, which has to be conceived as a long-term enterprise) are firstly what are its main themes; and secondly what are the necessary agencies required for the purpose of advance. Closely related to these, there is also the question of the strategy to be followed. On all these issues, there is great uncertainty and even disarray: whatever the future of socialism in England may be, the present condition of socialists is one of severe theoretical and political crisis—and this at a time which *ought* to have produced a powerful pull towards socialist alternatives but which appears to be producing pulls in the opposite direction. This makes it especially necessary to re-examine and specify basic themes. I use the word 'themes' rather than 'ends' because 'ends' may suggest a point of arrival, where there is none. Arrival at one point will open up perspectives of new ones, and so on. Socialism is not a steady state but a dynamic process; and there are no final points of arrival. This does not mean that the process is likely to be smooth and harmonious. How could it be since what it mainly involves is a manifold class struggle? Also, to speak of 'ends' easily suggests a contraposition with 'means'. But this is a false contraposition: ends and means cannot be disentangled.

The three themes which are bound to dominate socialism in England are firstly what may be called democratism; secondly egalitarianism; and thirdly efficiency. The first two of these have always been inscribed on the banners of English socialism; but their implications are perhaps less obvious than their assertion, and also more controversial. The third theme—efficiency—may seem a little surprising in this company. But I think that it does belong to it; and I will deal with it first. I do not thereby mean that it is the most important. There is no such order of importance intended for the simple reason that each of these three themes is indispensable, in socialist terms, to the other two and forms part of a socialist totality in which one element merges with the others.

Efficiency here means the capacity of the social system as a whole to provide, at the least possible individual and collective cost, the best conditions in which all those who live in that system may satisfy their needs and develop their faculties. Social life has to be organised, production

has to be planned and managed, distribution has to be assured, services have to be provided. One of the slogans of May 1968 was: 'Under the pavement, the beach.' (*Sous les pavés, la plage*'). But this is inaccurate. Under the pavement, there are the sewers. As far as the vast majority of people are concerned, standards of living are directly and immediately shaped by the quality of the services provided by the system and by its level of efficiency in general. But a basic feature of capitalism is the gross inadequacy of its collective services and its inherent bias against them, a bias which is further encouraged by the fact that a privileged minority can escape from collective inadequacy and inefficiency by purchasing private services, private education, private health, private space and private amenities.

The main point however is that the provision of collective services is not what capitalism as a system is for. Its logic and its rationale are the maximisation of profit for the private firm. This is why such an important part of the class struggle in capitalist countries has had to be concerned with the enlargement and the preservation of such gains as have been made in collective provision. Nor should socialists accept the terminological mystification involved in the limitation of the notion of 'social services' to health, education, housing, the environment—everything except production and distribution. For these too are eminently 'social services' and need to be seen as such.

A crucial part of the case that has to be made against capitalism is that it can never put to their best use the material resources which it has itself brought into being; that the social as well as the individual cost—the two being inseparable—of the perpetuation of an economic system predominantly geared to the maximisation of private profit is now too high; and that there are better ways of running a country's economic life than by the dynamic and values imposed upon it by the logic and imperatives of the capitalist mode of production.

This case against capitalism now largely goes by default. The vast multitude of agencies which help to shape consciousness are for the most part committed in one way or another to the worship of the system, to persuading people that there is no radical alternative to it, or that any radical alternative to it is bound to be worse, and that the market knows best. The task of these agencies of persuasion is made very much easier by the fact that most of the politicians who speak for organised labour and who lead it do not themselves seriously believe in any radical alternative to capitalism. Their purpose, as distinct from their occasional rhetoric at party conferences and other suitable gatherings, does not go beyond marginal reform, at the best. They are the willing managers of capitalism, and so steeped in its system of thought that they find no moral difficulty in this role. Not only do these leaders not believe in radical and structural change: they are in fact actively opposed to it. I will return to this later,

but I want to note here that the more or less complete abandonment of socialist positions by Labour leaders who command the loyalty or at least the audience of organised labour is a very large fact, which has a direct bearing on my subject.

Efficiency is not a particularly popular theme with socialists, not surprisingly since it is often invoked as part of a system of values and ideas which are far removed from socialism, or entirely opposed to it. It is perfectly true that in order to be incorporated into the socialist project, efficiency has to be linked with the other two themes, democratism and egalitarianism; just as they also, in a socialist perspective, have to be intertwined.

The pressure for the extension of democracy is a very old tradition in England; and so, it is just as well to recall, is the pressure against it. The struggle for democracy in the 19th century—to go back no further—included of course a host of people who were not socialists at all; and many if not most of them were not for that matter particularly good democrats either. They wanted a limited extension of the franchise and some other measures designed to break the power of landed property and privilege: but they very rapidly reached the limit of their democratising propensities and viewed with alarm the dangers of mass rule. After the passage of the second Reform Act in 1867, it became more and more common for the English political system to be described as 'democratic'. This was a very convenient appropriation and neutralisation of a term which had earlier held or been assumed to hold many subversive and dangerous connotations; and it was now given a severely limited and confined, limiting and confining meaning.

It has precisely been a major theme of socialism in England that democracy must be conceived in much larger terms than its liberal and bourgeois (and Labourist) advocates would allow. The latter might be content with the cramped limits within which 'democracy' in England was being held. But socialists always insisted that its meaning must be greatly extended.

This has had a number of aspects. One of them is the ancient demand that representation should be answerable and responsive, on the basis of a free, fair and equal suffrage; that it must be diffused and innovative; and that it should effectively penetrate all areas of civic life. Linked to this, there is the struggle for the defence and extension of civic freedoms, and against executive arbitrariness and police powers. There is about this sort of pressure a *concrete libertarianism* which is a difficult but obviously crucial part of the socialist project.

One reason for the present crisis of socialism, not only of course in England, is that it is not generally taken to be related to this concrete libertarianism but to bureaucracy and repression, at the limit in the form

of Stalinism. The future of socialism, in England as elsewhere, is bound up with the rehabilitation of the idea that it is a libertarian project, and the necessary alternative, in regard to civic freedoms, to the 'strong' and repressive state of capitalism-in-crisis.

Another broad aspect of democratism has to do with the erosion and disappearance of authoritarian relations at 'the point of production'; and this must assume a variety of forms and characteristics. But the idea of economic and industrial democracy is obviously part of the libertarian project; and it is now very closely related to the need for efficient economic activity. It is becoming constantly more difficult to ensure efficient work on the basis of traditional authoritarian management; and it will before long become impossible to ensure efficient work on any basis other than self-management. In this perspective, the democratisation of economic activity 'by way of self-management, producers' control or workers' control, or workers' cooperatives, or whatever else it may be called, is not only morally or ideologically desirable but functionally necessary. This pressure for fundamental changes in the 'relations of production' has very large implications, not least for trade unions, whose precise role and responsibilities in a new socialist setting is an open and crucial question which will need a lot of attention. In that new setting, it is certain that trade unions would have enhanced responsibilities. But this would also pose very sharply questions of trade union structure and organisation, of internal democracy and representativeness, of how to prevent trade unions from becoming bastions of bureaucratic power, and of the nature of other institutions which would need to share power and responsibility at the 'point of production'.

A third aspect of democratism, until fairly recently much more marginal than the other two in socialist thinking, has now come into full view, and mobilises great attention and energy. This is the demand for more democratic human relations in daily life, between men and women, in the home, between parents and children, in schools, in all spheres where people come together by necessity or choice. This is a tremendous business, which undermines strongly-held attitudes and deeply-ingrained customs and modes of behaviour, and which presents a manifold and diffuse and still unfocussed challenge to a class-ridden and class-encrusted society such as this. The 'cultural revolution' which this current signifies is now well under way. It has still a long way to go but it is obviously strong and almost certainly irreversible; and it will form an intrinsic part of the socialism-to-be.

What I have said so far clearly points to the third of my **themes**—egalitarianism. I understand by this something different from equality, or at least from absolute equality. Trying to achieve the latter condition requires the imposition of the tightest straitjacket on society, and is in

is the best arrangement possible and that to seek any alternative presents frightful dangers of one sort or another; and much else of the same kind. But they are not entitled to deny (which does not stop them doing it) that inequality remains a major feature of the social system in Britain. Socialists are necessarily opposed to this sort of social system; and socialism has to be about the dissolution of the concentrations of wealth and power which are typical of that system.

Let it be said again that egalitarianism, democratism and efficiency form the elements of an intertwined totality; and it is just as well to acknowledge that their relationship can by no means be taken to be automatically harmonious. The claims of one may not be easy to reconcile with the claims of the others: in fact, nothing is more certain than that nothing in such matters is ever likely to be easy. It is illusion or deceit to proclaim that the socialist project is an easy one: the point is rather that it is necessary and desirable to move in the directions to which it points.

There are many different requirements for moving in these directions. But there is one of them which has to be singled out, both because it is paramount to the purpose, and also because—and relatedly—it has been the most strongly controverted. This is the need for a major extension of public ownership. The Labour Party has of course been formally committed to this since 1918 by virtue of the famous Clause 4 of its Constitution; and however little earlier generations of Labour leaders might have wanted to do about it in practice, they were not much disposed to question the theoretical validity of the notion that it was an essential condition for the bringing into being of the altogether different form of society to which they were pledged and whose necessity and desirability they regularly proclaimed. It was only after the nationalisation measures **undertaken**—rather reluctantly—by the post-1945 Labour Government that the claim was advanced to the effect that public ownership was or might be one means among others to socialist ends, which themselves tended to get increasingly blurred, and which have indeed for the most part altogether disappeared from view.

In reality, what was obviously at stake was the abandonment of public ownership as a major commitment and its relegation to the status of an occasional, marginal and on the whole unwelcome item of policy. This was the defining stress of Gaitskellism and of 1950's Labour 'revisionism', of which Anthony Crosland was the most accomplished exponent. The reference to ends and means was always a distraction from the real issue, which is that public ownership is an essential condition for socialist advance. The point nowadays has to be made not only against 'revisionists', but also, from an entirely different perspective, against some Marxists as well, who tend to speak of the transfer to the public domain of major economic units as a 'mere' juridical transaction, which does not by itself

necessarily affect the nature of the 'relations of production', or which may even affect them adversely. This is quite true: the change to public ownership does not, as we know well enough by now, necessarily signify a major change in the way enterprises are run. But it should also be clear that it is absolutely impossible, without public ownership, to get on with the transformation of the 'relations of production' in socialist directions. To believe that such a transformation is possible in privately owned and controlled industry is unreasonable. There is a world of difference between the forced humanisation of 'industrial relations' which can be achieved under capitalism and the kind of cooperative economic activity (*Marx's* 'free association of the producers') which is a central part of the socialist project. The fact that the experience of nationalisation has not been encouraging in this respect is hardly conclusive: post-1945 nationalisation was never conceived in socialist terms.

Another reason for insisting on the necessity of public ownership is that effective planning and direction of the economy is not possible without it. That is fine if one believes in more or less untrammelled capitalist enterprise; but not otherwise. Nor is it fine if one does not believe in largely irresponsible corporate power. The rate and concentration of economic units in Britain has been quite remarkable. According to a recent study by Professor Prais, *The Evolution of Giant Firms in Britain*, the share which the hundred largest enterprises had in manufacturing net output in the U.K. in 1970 was 40 per cent, compared to some 16 per cent in 1909 and 22 per cent in 1949. In fact, the largest manufacturing enterprises in Britain had by 1970 overtaken the hundred largest manufacturers in the United States in their dominance over their respective national industries. And it is also very striking that Britain has now the lowest number of small manufacturing establishments of major capitalist countries. Here is a formidable concentration of private industrial power, to which must be linked a formidable concentration of private financial and commercial power. Any notion of socialism must be vacuous which does not include the bringing of such power under public control; and public control, in any effective sense, is impossible without actual ownership.

Public ownership would need to assume many diverse forms; and it would leave a considerable area of economic activity open to various forms of small-scale enterprise. It is not part of the socialist purpose to establish wholesale and total collectivism under which every corner shop and independent garage would be nationalised. This is a bogey which has regularly been raised both by Conservative and by Labour anti-nationalisers; and socialists need to exorcise it. But they also need to insist that it is part of their purpose to bring the 'commanding heights' of the economy and a good many of the lesser heights as well under one form or other of public ownership and control.

In saying this, one needs to take seriously the point that such an

endeavour presents considerable problems of inflated statism, which need to be met with institutionalised forms of democratic control at all levels—at the centre, at the middle range and at the periphery and grassroots. This must involve an effective dispersal of power *as well* as its concentration. Socialism is neither about the concentration of power, nor about its dispersal. It has to be about both, in a difficult but necessary dialectic; and it involves many different forms and different locations of power and responsibility.

What has been said so far is no more than a reformulation of propositions which have, in one way or another, always been at the core of socialism in England. There does not seem much need to apologise for this. For one thing, these propositions badly need to be restated as the themes of socialism, in a political climate which is hostile to them. For another, it is just as well to know what one is about. There is in these matters a definite range of possibilities: beyond it, one enters a world of rhetoric and fantasy which is only meaningful to its devotees.

The more difficult question has to be with agencies and strategy. Weaving themes and propositions is one thing; finding the agencies for their eventual realisation is another. And it is not enough to say that the job will eventually be done by the working class and its allies. This is true but insufficient: the working class and its allies need political agencies, and organisation. There is no serious person on the left who would be content to rely on unalloyed spontaneity.

It is probably the case, even today, that a very substantial majority of people on the left see the future of socialism in England as bound up with the Labour Party, in the sense that they see it as the only possible vehicle of advance, the historically given (or chosen) agency of the social forces, and notably of organised labour, which can carry the process forward. They do not for the most part claim that the Labour Party is *now* in the right condition for what is obviously bound to be a very arduous business. But they do claim that the Labour Party *can* be turned into an agency of socialist advance, and that a combination of pressure and crisis will bring this about. The task of socialists, the argument goes, is to hasten and further this transformation from within; or, in the Communist variant of this, from either within the Labour Party or the Communist Party.

There is here a very important line of division among socialists in England—between those who believe that the Labour Party can and must be thus transformed, and those who do not. But there also seems to me to exist a certain amount of confusion on both sides of the line as to what is involved.

Those who take the first view do so because the Labour Party is, overwhelmingly, the party of organised labour. If it was not, the problem would present itself differently or not at all. But the undoubted fact of

the Labour Party's predominance as the political and electoral expression of organised labour and of a large part of the working class induces among these socialists a double and related misjudgment. The first of these is a gross *underestimation* of the ascendancy which the leaders of the Labour Party have over it, and these leaders' absolute determination to 'fight and fight and fight again' to save the party they love—to save it from socialist policies, that is. There is no good reason for thinking that what they have achieved so often before cannot be done again. But even if it is argued that the Labour Left may come to assume a stronger—even a commanding—position in the counsels of the Labour Party, the Labour Right would still remain, deeply entrenched and utterly determined not to let go. How can it seriously be contended that such a party, torn by fundamental dissension and undermined from within, would be an appropriate instrument for the vast enterprise which is involved in pushing forward with socialist policies in England?

This leads me to the second and related misjudgment, namely the gross *overestimation* of the strength of the socialist forces in the Labour Party and in the labour movement at large. The whole argument is often conducted as if large and powerful socialist armies were already assembled, and only waiting for new and resolute commanders in place of the old ones to move to the assault of capitalism. But this is obviously nonsense. The socialist movement in England, as opposed to or at least as distinct from the labour movement, is really quite weak. From a socialist point of view, **1977** is a good deal closer to **1877** than has commonly been held on the left. I don't of course under-rate how much has moved forward, how much experience has accumulated over these hundred years of effort and struggle, and how much stronger and more widespread socialist ideas now are, in England and in the rest of the world. Even so, it is necessary to realise that the existence of the Labour Party, and its formal commitment to socialist aims, has created an 'optical illusion' about the strength of socialism in England—and a sharp distinction *bas* to be drawn between a labour movement which is well-entrenched, strongly organised and conscious of its rights on the one hand, and a socialist movement on the other. The two overlap at many different points. But they are in no way the same movement, with the same objectives and the same perspectives. Obviously, the future of socialism depends on the overlap getting steadily greater, and on the socialist idea coming to be a specific and 'operational' part of the labour movement. It is nothing of the kind at present.

To say this is not to argue that socialists in the Labour Party should instantly leave it: it is rather, at this point, to ask for a reappraisal of the agencies which the socialist cause in England needs.

The same reappraisal also needs to be made, it seems to me, on the left of the Labour Party. In the **1976** *Socialist Register*, I wrote that none of the

existing parties, groups and sects of that left could, for different reasons, be thought of as the core or embryo of the viable socialist party which is so badly required. I also noted then that all the organisations of the 'ultra-left' have 'a common perception of socialist change in terms of a revolutionary seizure of power on the Bolshevik model of October 1917'; but that this Bolshevik 'model' had 'very little appeal in the working class movements of bourgeois democratic regimes in general, and virtually no appeal in the British working class movement'. And I added that 'the context of a bourgeois democratic regime, in Britain at least as much as elsewhere, imposes upon revolutionary socialists a strategy of advance which has to include a real measure of electoral legitimation.' These propositions need to be clarified and the following remarks are intended to do this.

The 'Bolshevik model' means working towards the formation of a 'vanguard party' based on 'democratic centralism' and preparing for a seizure of power, in the not too remote future, on the basis of a generalised popular insurrection. The 'model' also includes, as an essential part, the 'smashing' of the bourgeois state and the establishment of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. It is this 'model' that all the Marxist-Leninist groupings of the 'ultra-left' (but not the Communist Party) have in common, notwithstanding all their other differences.

Although it is perfectly true and obvious that the 'model' altogether lacks popular appeal in England, it may well be that the more important point to be made about it is that acceptance of it strengthens certain political tendencies and attitudes which are self-defeating and dangerous. The most obvious such tendency and attitude is a deep contempt for the institutions which make up capitalist democracy, both at local and national levels; and also for many if not most of the institutions which a 'reformist' working class movement has fashioned over a period of a century and a half.

It is one thing to insist on the limitations and shortcomings of capitalist democracy, to say that there are many different necessary ways of fighting the class struggle, and that to seek and win a measure of electoral support, at local and national levels, is not enough and never can be. But it is quite another thing to make light of the fact that one of the conditions for achieving a firm implantation in local and national life, which a serious socialist party obviously needs, is to work for the achievement of a solid, durable body of political and electoral support at the grassroots.

It is reasonable and necessary to warn against obsessive and opportunistic electoralism, and against the naive illusion that a socialist majority in the House of Commons would be a sufficient condition for the transformation of the existing capitalist order into a radically different one—not that such a majority appears likely in the near future. But when all such reservations and warnings have been expressed, the fact remains

that, *in the conditions of capitalist democracy*, sustained electoral and political work, at all levels, must be taken as an essential part of the class struggle and of the attempt to achieve socialist implantation. 'Ultra-left' groupings occasionally intervene in elections. But they don't take such business seriously, and are therefore not taken seriously by the people whose support they need. They are here today and gone tomorrow. They don't build for the future. And the same must be said about their work in trade unions and other institutions of the labour movement: their militancy too often smacks of adventurism, their slogans of demagogic overbidding, their struggle against union bureaucracy as mere personal denigration.

Nothing of this is intended to cast doubt on the dedication and selflessness of the people concerned. Nor is it intended to belittle the positive side of their contribution to the life of the movement. It is simply to point out that a lot of effort and energy are being dissipated to no real effect, and that one crucial reason for this is that far too many people in the revolutionary left are not willing to take due account of the fact that they are working, whether they like it or not, in a given political environment, that of capitalist democracy, and that they have NO OPTION but to direct an important part of their efforts to political implantation in the institutions of capitalist democracy, at local level first of all. This is in no way to underestimate the importance of other forms of implantation, at the 'point of production' and elsewhere. These are not opposed aspects of the struggle but complementary ones.

The failure to act upon this has had consequences which are plain to see, and which have been already highlighted by the Stechford by-election. At that by-election, held on March **31**, Paul Foot, standing for the Socialist Workers' Party, obtained **377** votes and the candidate of the International Marxist Group **494**. (The fact that there should have been *two* candidates of the revolutionary left is itself a token of its present appalling condition.) The National Front candidate obtained **1955** votes or **8.2** per cent of the votes cast. Labour lost to the Conservatives the seat which it had held with an **11,923** majority at the General Election of October **1974**. This is not an isolated episode. It is only one of many danger signals which are ringing loud and clear and which require a new response.

The coming into being of a new socialist party in England obviously raises many difficult questions to which I do not pretend to have the answers. But two points may be made about it here. The first is that such a party is most likely to be the product of a coming together of people who belong already to different parties and groupings as well as of people who do not. Indeed, it may well at first have to assume some kind of federal form and join in a more or less loose alliance different groupings of people, drawn

from existing organisations and persuaded that these organisations do not and will not provide the political agency which is needed. The chances are that this will happen as a result of joint activities and struggles over specific issues, in the course of which enough people will come to think that something else is possible.

The second point is closely related to the first. This is that no such party can be viable on the basis of a 'monolithic' organisation, demanding from its members subscription to a 'democratic centralism' which has always served as a convenient device for authoritarian party structures. On the contrary, any such party would have to start with the acknowledgment that it is a grouping of people bred in different traditions, attracted to different perspectives, and even belonging to different factions. It would have a left, a right and a centre, co-existing and working together in a state of permanent tension and argument. This is the price which a serious socialist party in England will have to pay in order to have vitality and effectiveness; and it is not only a necessary but a reasonable price to pay. After all, the parties and sects which have made a cardinal virtue of 'monolithic' unity and which have treated 'democratic centralism' as an article of faith have not been very successful in avoiding tension and argument, splits and ruptures—all to no very obvious advantage or gain. Total purists will not want to be mixed up with such an awkward and unfamiliar enterprise; but their boycott of it will by no means be all loss.

Of course, a new socialist party would need to work out a programme, policies and perspectives capable of commanding the broad assent of its members or constituent elements; and this is bound to be a difficult and prolonged business. But it should not be an impossible one. And there ought to be spur enough in the socialist left's present inability to respond adequately to the present crisis, and in the dangers which now threaten from the right.