

## PROBLEMS AND PROMISE OF SOCIALIST RENEWAL

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The title of this *Socialist Register* might well have been extended to read 'Problems and Promise of Socialist Renewal East and West'. For while most of the articles in this volume do deal with problems, there is also implicit in them, and indeed quite often explicit, a promise of advance and renewal. This is most obvious in relation to the process of change now in train in the Soviet Union, which is discussed in the first five articles of the volume. But in ways which are perhaps less obvious, the problems which confront socialists in the West also harbour the promise—which does not of course mean the assurance—of advance. Problems and promise are intertwined: where there is the one, there is also the other. In a period in which the words most closely associated with socialism are words like crises, dilemmas, defeats and disasters, and in which socialists are declared, in many instances by socialists themselves, to be an endangered species, this dialectic of problems and promise needs to be stressed. It is this relationship that we propose to discuss in this introductory article, with reference to some of the specific issues which are analysed in the volume.

### 1. *The Gorbachev Revolution*

We begin with the vast changes which have been set in motion by Mikhail Gorbachev since he became General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985. In this relatively short period of time, a veritable cultural revolution has been proceeding at a furious pace in the USSR, and has dramatically affected the discussion of public issues, including many that had hitherto been taboo or discussed only in the wooden language of officialdom. These changes are richly documented in the articles we publish in this volume.

Of course, it is very necessary to emphasise the limited reach of the changes which have so far occurred. Vast structural changes in the economy, the party and the state will have to take place before the USSR even begins to approximate to what could legitimately be called a socialist democracy. But this is precisely one instance of the dialectic to which we referred, namely the fact that the promise of change which now exists is hinged by immense problems and obstacles; just as, in reverse, the fact that the difficulties are the subject of public debate and that many of them

of liberation, reform and revolution in the world are not the product of Soviet expansionism and a threat to 'national security', but legitimate movements of liberation from exploitation and tyranny. The Nicaraguan revolution, some aspects of which are discussed in two articles in this volume, is one such movement and it has come to symbolise the tenacity and courage with which authentic movements of liberation in the 'third world' resist the attempt to destroy them.

Nothing that has been said here is intended to convey a Panglossian notion that the Left is doing better every day in every way and that socialist renewal is imminent. On the contrary, the Left is doing badly and faces formidable challenges, in intellectual and in political terms. Any kind of 'triumphalism', in present circumstances, would deservedly be derided. The point we are making is an entirely different one, namely that the problems which the Left faces themselves disclose, however dimly, the possibility of their resolution and the promise of renewal.

It is also salutary, in this connection, to recall the not so distant past, and the fact that earlier generations of socialists faced difficulties at least as great as those confronting the present generation. This is no matter for complacency: but it does nevertheless introduce a necessary historical perspective to the appreciation of the contemporary difficulties.

Fifty years ago, for instance, Hitler and Mussolini were triumphant, and Fascism seemed to many to be the wave of the future, and certainly constituted an immediate and dreadful threat. Austria had gone in **1934** and the Spanish Republic had begun its descent into the Fascist abyss. Czechoslovakia was about to be engulfed and the British and French governments seemed launched on an irreversible course of appeasement of the dictators which was akin to complicity with Fascist aggression. Mussolini was the conqueror of Abyssinia and was about to overwhelm Albania. The Conservatives in Britain had won a resounding electoral victory in **1935**, despite mass unemployment and deprivation; and the Labour opposition was weak and divided, with no possibility of displacing the Tories for many years to come. The Popular Front Government in France, elected in **1936**, was in retreat and would soon be defeated; and in the United States, the reforming zeal of the Roosevelt Administration, such as it was, had begun to wane. In the Soviet Union, **1937** and **1938** were the years in which the slaughter of Communists and non-Communists alike was reaching its most murderous heights, at the same time as the apotheosis of Stalin and all his works was mandatory in the world Communist movement.

Also, the larger part of the planet, fifty years ago, was under the domination of Britain, France, and lesser colonial powers like Belgium, Holland and Portugal, with Central and Latin America under secure American hegemony. The liberation struggles which were then in train

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were puny in comparison with later ones, save for China where Mao Tse-tung's armies were engaged in a bitter war on two fronts—against Chang Kai-shek on the one hand and the Japanese invaders on the other. Black movements in the United States were small, the American South was steeped in a regime of apartheid and the rest of the United States was not much better. Feminism was not a movement, and the oppression of women not only failed to be seriously resisted, but was in this period unacknowledged and unperceived, even by many of its victims. Sexual preference fifty years ago was taken to mean that men preferred blondes to brunettes, or vice-versa; and gays were in the closet, or in jail.

The bare recital of such a catalogue shows that immense advances have been made in a short fifty years. Not of all of them can by any means be described as socialist advances; but they do form part of a process of human liberation which is an intrinsic part of socialist purposes. It may also be said that many of these advances were not achieved by socialists at all. That is so; but they were made as a result of pressure and struggle from below, and testify to the existence, vitality and potency of forces of protest, pressure and change, not least in the working class.

Of course, the catalogue would be gravely deficient, indeed false, if it did not include retreats as well as advances; and it would need to include, as a grimly negative fact, the permanent possibility of nuclear annihilation. But historical perspective nevertheless makes possible the necessary realisation that disappointments and defeats, however grave, must be treated as episodes in a long and arduous struggle, rather than as the fatal steps towards an historical terminus which they are so often proclaimed to be. It is in this perspective that the present volume has been conceived.

have come on to the agenda of reform is also a source of hope that renewal and advance in socialist directions are at least possible. All the more is it necessary to stress this if one recalls how bleak, from this point of view, the situation seemed a short time ago.

The problems which confront the reformers arise from different sources. First, and perhaps most important of all, there is the enormous weight of power and privilege accumulated by people in the upper and uppermost reaches of the party and the state. During the Stalin era, the ranks of this privileged class were devastated, even while the position of the class itself was being strengthened and its privileges greatly enhanced. Stalin's demise was greeted with a collective sigh of relief in every plush office in the Soviet Union, But Nikita Khrushchev, in his own unsystematic and often improvised attempts at reform, maintained a sense of insecurity and uncertainty in the apparatus of power. It was really with Leonid Brezhnev's accession to power that officialdom really came into its own, and was able to enjoy the fruits of office, in the secure knowledge that there would be no dangerous and half-baked manifestations of reforming zeal at the top.

The costs to Soviet society which the Brezhnev years of complacency and corruption involved have yielded major pressures for reform. Gorbachev, as the product of these pressures, has again challenged the conservatism of the managers in the economy and the state, and has done this much more systematically and thoroughly than Khrushchev ever did; and it seems from his declarations that there is in this respect more to come. He has so far encountered less overt opposition at the top of the party and the state than might have been expected; and such overt resistance is in any case difficult in the Soviet system, notwithstanding glasnost. But it is no secret that there is a good deal of hostility to many of the Gorbachev reforms in the inner circle of decision-makers, and beyond, and to the whole thrust of his policies. Gorbachev himself has occasionally referred to the resistances which his initiatives encounter.

Perhaps even more important than any direct opposition, there is the immense power of bureaucratic inertia, and the sullen resistance to change offered by the people who are supposed to implement it. Such opposition means that decisions and policies earnestly proclaimed at the top find inadequate translation—or no translation at all in practice.

The problem for the Gorbachev reforms does not, however, only stem from bureaucratic resistance or inertia. It also stems from the opposition of workers and peasants suspicious of what Gorbachev is trying to do, and by no means persuaded that the reforms will necessarily be of great benefit to them. This is hardly surprising: for at the core of the Gorbachev message, there is the insistence that everybody must work harder and better, and that **failure** to do so may result in the loss of a job. This may not mean the kind of unemployment to which workers in the West are

subjected; but it does mean greater insecurity and uncertainty than had long been the custom; and invocations to work harder, from people whose own work is interesting, agreeable and well-rewarded, does not generate much enthusiasm in people whose work does not warrant such description, and whose rewards for harder and better work may in any case be problematic, or at least set in the future.

However, one of Gorbachev's main concerns is precisely to enlist the co-operation and enthusiasm of the mass of workers and peasants, a concern grounded in the entirely accurate view that in no other way is it possible to achieve the economic and social advances which he and his allies seek. Obtaining this popular support, at work and beyond, is bound to be an exceedingly difficult task. It cannot be achieved, East or West, by reliance on the compulsions of the market. The market is a hard task-master; but workers will do all they can to subvert its commands, and will always find ways of doing so. For his part, Gorbachev has proclaimed his conviction that the key to the eliciting of co-operation lies in 'democratisation' at the workplace and in all other spheres of Soviet life. But essential though this is, on many different counts, it is no magic wand, capable of instantly dissipating ancient traditions, customs and modes of behaviour. Even on the best of assumptions, there is a long way to go.

This, however, should not be allowed to dim the immense significance of what is occurring in the Soviet Union; and it needs to be said that, from a socialist point of view, it represents one of the most hopeful developments anywhere in the world since Khrushchev's 'secret speech' at the XXth Congress of the CPSU in 1956. If it is allowed to proceed, it will undoubtedly help the socialist cause on a global scale. The Soviet Union will never again be accorded the unquestioning allegiance it claimed—and received—from Communists and others all over the world under Stalin: those days are irrevocably—and mercifully—gone. But continued democratisation would nevertheless make the USSR a much more positive point of reference for socialists; and at the very least, it would deprive the forces of conservatism in the West of a major and effective weapon against the Left everywhere.

## II. *Agencies and Constituencies*

The second issue which is raised in a number of articles in this volume concerns the deep crisis which has for some time gripped the political parties that have dominated the Left political scene throughout the twentieth century—social democratic parties on the one hand, and Communist parties on the other. Electorally, the picture is mixed: social democratic parties have in recent years done relatively well in New Zealand, Australia, Sweden and Greece, and the Canadian New Democratic Party seems poised for substantial advances in the near future. But these parties tend to be exceptions in an otherwise sombre political scene, and

their own performance in office has also been marked by the compromises and retreats which have been typical of social democracy everywhere.

Perhaps the most dismal example of social democratic crisis is that of the Labour Party in Britain; and the repression of a movement of socialist renewal in and through that party has only intensified its continuing debilitation. In a period of exceptionally virulent Conservative government, the Labour Party has been quite unable to offer effective opposition and has thereby contributed to the demoralisation of the Left.

As for Communist parties, they are almost everywhere doing badly, the most notable case here being the French Communist Party, which now commands the electoral allegiance of less than **10%** of French voters, less than the proto-Fascist National Front. Much less dramatically, but nevertheless significantly, the Italian Communist Party, the beacon of Eurocommunism, has also suffered a steady loss of electoral strength and political direction in the last ten years.

Anti-socialist commentators gleefully take this decline as proof positive of a decisive shift in the working class, away from 'socialism', 'collectivism', etc., in favour of 'individualism', 'the market', and 'popular capitalism'; and even many commentators on the Left have accepted this and preached a 'new realism', amounting in effect to a final reconciliation with capitalism and the abandonment, in practical terms, of ~~any~~ notion of socialist transformation.

In sober fact, the explanation of the electoral and political failures of parties of the Left in recent years needs to be sought much less in the changes which are occurring in the working class than in the weaknesses of these parties themselves.

For one thing, social democracy has undoubtedly suffered from the fact that it has, in office, tended to adopt many of the policies of its conservative opponents. Faced with conditions of crisis, it has fallen back on typical conservative remedies—wage 'restraint', cuts in public expenditure (though not, be it noted, in the realm of defence), attacks on trade unions and activists. It is absurd, in this respect, to try and explain the decline of the Labour Party in Britain without according a central place to the performance of Labour governments between **1964** and **1970**, and **1974** to **1979**. In fairness, it must be said that the record is not all negative, and is infinitely preferable, from a socialist point of view, to that of the Thatcher Government since **1979**. But the record does nevertheless include a host of *measures* which were deeply detrimental to the working class and to 'lower income groups' in general. In this light, what is really remarkable is not that a good many Labour voters turned away from the Labour Party but that so many remained with it and continued to support it at the polls.

As for those who did not, some were no doubt influenced by the appeal of such things as home and share ownership. But most of them, it is

reasonable to presume, were more greatly influenced by the apparent credibility of the slogan 'there is no alternative': the Labour Party's failures in office and its weaknesses in opposition greatly contributed to this view.

The same story may be told of the French Socialist Government that came to office with the victory of François Mitterrand in 1981. After a year of hectic reform, and under the impact of economic crisis, the Government retreated and fell back on measures of retrenchment and 'austerity' which, as always, hit the working class and the disadvantaged rather than the rich. The disillusionment and alienation which this produces is always of great advantage to the Right and paves its way back to power, as happened in both Britain and France.

Also, an explanation of the decline of support for the PCF must surely include the fact that the Party was implicated in the retreats of the Socialist Government, since it had four ministers in that government (albeit in junior positions) and that it supported the government, even if with reservations. Nor again is it irrelevant to observe that the electoral decline of the Italian Communist Party occurred after it gave the Christian Socialist Government its strong support, despite being excluded from office, and was for all practical purposes (but not for that of deciding policy) a part of the governmental coalition.

Related to this, and perhaps even more important, is the fact that both social democratic and Communist parties have appeared weak, uncertain and divided, with discordant voices offering contrary orientations and policies. There is nothing new in the division in social democratic parties between Left and Right: what is new and highly significant is that the Right and the Centre in these parties, though remaining in quite firm control of the party apparatus and its main lines of direction, have since the early 1970s found it very difficult to stifle and neutralise the Left. It is precisely their attempts to do so, and their failure to achieve the desired results, which has produced visible and damaging conflicts.

For their part, Communist parties have also come to suffer from quite serious crises of orientation and even identity. They are not 'revolutionary' in the strong, 'insurrectionary', sense of the term; but nor are they social democratic parties pure and simple. They are not part of the bourgeois political establishment, in the same way as their social democratic counterparts; but nor are they wholly outside that establishment, at least in countries like France and Italy. Moreover, and despite constant invocations to 'unity' and the stubborn maintenance of a 'ban on factions', they too are deeply divided parties, with many different tendencies and orientations. These divisions, as George Ross and Stephen Hellman show in their articles on the PCF and the PCI, make impossible a consistent and coherent line of policy, and produce extreme difficulties for parties whose mechanisms of internal debate are in any case clogged and unwieldy. In some cases, as

in Spain and Britain, the divisions in Communist parties have produced splits and catastrophic losses of membership. But the crisis is a general one, and runs very deep.

Nor is there any very good reason for thinking that it can easily be overcome. The pressure from the Left within social democratic parties will endure, as the limits and contradictions of capitalism become more blatant, and generate demands for more radical strategies. These pressures, however, are also likely to be fiercely resisted by leaderships who view radical orientations as politically damaging and electorally suicidal. Whereas the Left will press for a serious challenge to capitalism they will seek salvation in a mixture of 'moderate' social reform and appeals to acquisitive individualism; and they will continue to resist with the utmost determination all pressures from the Left for a fundamental reappraisal of foreign and defence policies in the direction of non-alignment and reduced military expenditure.

What this means, inevitably, is that both social democratic and Communist parties will continue to be divided, and to present the image of division to those whose support they need. Given this, it might at first sight seem bizarre, almost perverse, to find any promise in these crises; and there can certainly be no assurance that they will be resolved in positive ways. But precisely because the crises which beset these formations run so deep, there is likely sooner or later to be moves towards a realignment of socialists that would hold considerable promise for the Left. It is by no means unreasonable to think of a convergence which would bring together left socialists, Communists and others in new formations of the Left. The very decrepitude, in ideological and political terms, which marks social democracy on the one hand; and the deep uncertainties and loss of support which affect Communist parties on the other, puts realignment of the Left on the agenda. The realignment would obviously take different forms in different countries: the important point is that it could, in due course, produce political formations free from the (very different but very crippling) vices which have characterised the old parties of the Left.

What makes this all the more possible is that there are today far fewer fundamental differences to separate left socialists, Communists and many other progressive people. Most such people now think of the socialist project in terms which differ mainly in emphasis rather than fundamentals: in terms of diverse forms of social ownership; of a radical extension of democratic forms in all spheres of life; and of altogether new positions in defence and foreign policy, perhaps best encapsulated under the rubric 'non-alignment'. The realignment that is wanted, and which concrete needs and circumstances will press upon the Left, would have as its purpose a fundamental transformation of the social order; but it would also seek to build on earlier democratic achievements, and on the democratic forms

wrenched out of dominant classes.

The fundamental transformation of the social order cannot be realised without popular support and involvement, all the more so since any such socialist advance would be bitterly contested by domestic and foreign conservative forces. The question which this raises is whether there are constituencies 'out there' which are at least potentially available to support the transformative endeavours of the agencies of the Left. We have already indicated that we see no good evidence for the constantly proclaimed affirmation that there has occurred a vast popular shift to the right in advanced capitalist countries. But we have also acknowledged the shift away, in electoral and political terms, from the Left. The real **question**—and no question could be more crucial to the socialist project—is whether this drift is reversible or not. We believe that it is, on condition that the kind of realignment on the Left to which we have referred takes place; that is, provided that adequate agencies come into being.

'Adequate agencies' in this context means political formations which can effectively give political coherence to a vast constituency of workers, white and black, men and women, young and old, and to a host of other people in other classes as well, and mobilise them in support of a **trans-**formative programme that would speak to their needs and aspirations. There is a long way to go before anything of the sort is achieved anywhere in the advanced capitalist world; but there is no reason to believe that it cannot take place, given the concrete shortcomings and derelictions of contemporary capitalism, and the multiple alienations which they engender. We referred earlier to the attractions of share ownership to many workers. But these attractions were the product of the speculative stock market bubble of recent years. The burst of this bubble will not bring down the capitalist system; but devalued shares will certainly dim the attractions of 'popular capitalism'.

The great mass of people in advanced capitalist countries have always rejected the promptings of ultra-revolutionary parties, groupings and sects. But vast numbers of people in these countries, often constituting an electoral majority, have voted for parties whose programmes promised radical and structural reform, of a kind designed, in the words of the programme with which the Labour Party won a general election in February 1974, to bring about a 'fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families'. So too did a majority of French voters support the Common Programme in 1981 and gave a resounding majority to the Left in Parliament. This support may not have been the result of burning socialist convictions on the part of many or even most of the people who did vote for the Left; and it is clear that the support given to the Left is often brittle and vulnerable to disillusionment. But the lesson to be drawn from this is not to retreat from radical policies but to convince the largest

possible number of people that these policies are worth struggling for.

The Left not only needs to regain lost support in the working class and beyond; it must also attract a large part of the working class which has always upheld conservative parties. Far from having reached the peak of their potential support in the working class, parties of the Left have never brought to their side masses of men and women whose support they must elicit. There is no inherent barrier to this being achieved. Indeed, this is putting the point too negatively. It is unfortunate that it has taken the Stock Market crash to remind many people, not least on the Left, that capitalist crises are not a thing of the past. These crises and their consequences offer new opportunities to redefine the terms of political debate and to mobilise support for socialist alternatives.

### III. *The American Problem*

If there is one part of the world which seems, from a socialist perspective, to be full of problems but wholly barren of promise, it is the United States. Ever since World War II, the socialist Left in America has been ruthlessly and effectively pushed back to the outer periphery of political life; and the recent decline in American economic power, which Rogers and Cohen analyse in this volume, has not, to all appearances, helped the Left to gain a more substantial degree of influence. Political debate remains mostly confined within a narrow ideological spectrum which runs from extreme reactionary positions at one end to a mild and highly defensive liberalism at the other. This is of course why political debate in the United States so often seems superficial and even spurious, full of sound and fury but signifying very little.

This virtual obliteration of the socialist Left from the political arena would be regrettable in any country: in the United States, it is nothing short of disastrous, given the role which America plays in the world. Ever since the end of World War II, the United States has been engaged in a global crusade not only against all revolutionary movements in the world, but against all movements of radical reform as well. For this crusade to be pursued effectively, it was essential that opposition to it within the United States should be dispersed and defeated, which required above all the defeat of the Left. This was successfully accomplished in the late forties and fifties, by way of an unremitting and many-sided campaign of harassment and persecution of Communists and radicals, of which McCarthyism was only the most virulent and visible manifestation. The socialist Left has never been able to recover from this assault; or perhaps more accurately, it has never been allowed to, since the assault itself has never come to an end. Nor is it only the socialist Left which has been under attack: everything and everybody to the Left of centre has been the target of conservative forces, so much so that it was not Communists or socialists which President Reagan made the target of his denunciations in the mid-

term congressional elections of 1986 as he campaigned across the country, but 'liberals'.

The subduing of the socialist Left in the United States is an awful story. But it has not signified the end of protest and pressure against conservative policies at home and counter-revolutionary policies and deeds abroad. On the contrary, there emerged, within a decade of the neutralisation of the socialist Left, a black movement for civil rights, followed by the upsurge of the New Left, the mobilisation against the war in Vietnam, the feminist movement, and innumerable local and community movements throughout the country. Recently, remarkable changes have also occurred within the Catholic Church, with the growth of a radical movement of dissent and protest which runs counter to the positions of a conservative Pope. Also, it would be a great mistake to underestimate the strength of the anti-interventionist currents which form part of American life.

The limitations of all such movements are evident enough, nowhere more so than in terms of an explicit socialist politics: most of these movements do not challenge the system at its roots, and do not offer a clear alternative to it. Yet these limitations should not obscure the degree to which the progressive movements do constitute a point of reference which powerholders in the United States have to take into account. Whether the issue is arms control or Nicaragua, even as reactionary an Administration as the present one is compelled to fight a difficult battle for the hearts and minds of the American people, and has by no means been able to assure itself of victory. Left to its own devices and impulses, and freed from worry about the evil effects, as it sees them, of the 'Vietnam syndrome', the Reagan Administration could have been counted on to pursue even more interventionist and aggressive policies than it has; and had it not been for powerful currents of popular opinion, legislators in Congress would have been far less ready to challenge the executive branch over Irangate, the Bork nomination and other contentious issues. The glass, here as elsewhere, is always half full or half empty; and the strength of reactionary forces in American society and in the media tends to occlude the reality and the resilience of progressive opinion in the United States. It is this of which the Rainbow Coalition, which Vicente Navarro discusses in his article, is one important expression; and the existence of these diverse forces does afford the hope, and holds out the promise, of a more effective opposition to American interventionism abroad.

The Gorbachev revolution is of the highest relevance both to the strengthening of progressive forces in the United States and to the reconstruction of the American socialist Left. For the initiatives which Mr Gorbachev has taken at home and abroad will help to erode the belief that the United States faces an implacable enemy bent on world domination; and this will make it easier for progressive forces in the United States to persuade an ever-greater number of Americans that movements