

COMMUNISM AS AN IDEAL

BY PAUL M. SWEEZY

The conception of a communist society in which all property is owned in common is, of course, an old one, dating back at least as far as Thomas More's *Utopia*, written early in the 16th century.* But what the world understands by communism today is almost entirely a product of Marxian thought and practice. For this reason, attention will be confined here to what may be called Marxian communism. To begin with, a terminological clarification seems called for.

The word socialism was first used around the beginning of the 19th century in France, and first in its present-day sense by the socialist sects in France and England during the 1820's and 1830's. The Owenites, for example, meant by socialism a society in which collective ownership of the means of production is substituted for private ownership, and that is what most people regard as the *differentia specifica* of socialism today. But during the later 1830's and the early 1840's, writers calling themselves socialists of one sort or another came forth with a great variety of schemes, all intended to improve or perfect the human condition but differing so widely about the means to be employed that anyone seeking to define socialism in that period would have been hard put to it to find any common core of meaning to the numerous "socialisms" of the day. It was at just this time

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* Most historians of the subject would trace the origins of communist doctrine to the world of classical antiquity, citing Plato and the Essenes as outstanding protagonists. Plato's "communism," however, rested on a basis of slavery; and the Essenes were a religious sect preaching withdrawal from the world rather than its reform. Doctrines and movements like these, while recurring from time to time prior to the 16th century, can hardly be considered true forerunners of modern socialism and communism.

that Marx and Engels came on the scene. Feeling a need to differentiate themselves from the various existing schools of socialism, they adopted the label communist. The famous document issued on the eve of the revolutions of 1848 was thus the Communist Manifesto, not the Socialist Manifesto.

Subsequently, however, as Marxism rose to dominance among the radical tendencies of the day, the word socialism returned to favor and came to be more and more identified with the Marxian conception of the society of the future. So it came to pass that by the time national parties came into being in the 1870's and 1880's, most of them called themselves socialist or social democratic and proclaimed their goal to be socialism—a state of society in which private property in the means of production has been replaced by public ownership, and the guidance of production by prices and profits has been replaced by planning. Marx and his followers, however, did not hold the view that history would stop with the establishment of socialism. Socialist society would undergo development and evolution and would eventually be transformed into a higher form of society which was now given the old name of communism.

Thus before the end of the 19th century, the two words had acquired fairly generally accepted meanings: socialism was the first or lower stage of the collectivist society which would take the place of capitalism; communism was the second or higher stage. From the Marxian point of view, therefore, communism must be thought of as growing out of socialism just as socialism grows out of capitalism; and to understand the sense in which communism is the goal of the whole movement, one must view it not as an abstract utopia but as the end product of an historical process which has to be treated as a continuous whole. What this end product will be like and why it is regarded as an ideal worth striving for are therefore questions that can best be answered in a step-by-step fashion. First, let us inquire in what respects socialism represents an advance over capitalism, and then proceed to a consideration of the further transformations which socialism is expected to undergo on the road to full communism.

As already noted, the *differentia specifica* of socialism as

compared to capitalism is public ownership of the means of production. This does not mean *all* the means of production: what it does mean is that those branches of the economy which are *decisive* for its functioning must be in what is nowadays often called the "public sector." There is no general rule for determining exactly what must be included, the branches which are to be considered decisive varying in different economies at different stages of development. To take an example, one might hazard the guess that in the United States today the socialization of all corporations with assets of a million dollars or more would amply suffice to bring the economic levers of command into the hands of public authority. It is worth noting that this would leave several million private enterprises and wide opportunity for anyone to set up a business of his own. The only requirement would be that it must remain a small business; if it grew beyond a certain point it would automatically "graduate" into the public sector. And of course all the big corporations, which dominate U.S. economic life and which are already collectives in all but name (though still run by and for private individuals and groups), would have to be transferred to the public sector from the outset.

Socialists believe that this transfer of the levers of command from private to public authority will make it possible to eliminate the major economic evils of capitalist society. Evidently, the guiding principle of the managers of firms and industries can no longer be to maximize the profits of the enterprises for which they are responsible. The public sector—and, since it is assumed to be dominant, this means the whole economy as well—must be governed by an economic plan, and each enterprise must be given a specific role in the plan. The goal of managements must then be to fulfill, and if possible overfulfill, the targets set for them in the plan. Success (or failure) with all its consequences is judged accordingly, just as under the present system success (or failure) is judged by the yardstick of profits (or losses).

Nota bene that while this arrangement does away with production for profit (in the public sector), it does *not* by any means eliminate what is often called the profit *motive*, which

economic theory since long before the time of Adam Smith has rightly regarded as the mainspring of economic activity. When we speak of the profit motive, we mean simply that those who engage in economic activity are moved primarily by the desire to reap as large a material reward as possible, and this of course applies not only to the owners or managers of capital but also to workers and farmers and lawyers and professional baseball players. Each has his job to do, and each expects that the better he does it the more he will be paid. It is this expectation that motivates him to work efficiently and hard. There is nothing in the nature of socialism that conflicts in any way with the continued operation of the profit motive in this sense. What changes is only the definition of the jobs of the managers, not the motives which lead them to strive for optimum performance. In General Motors, the president is selected and paid well if he contributes to the profitability of the company; under socialism, the head of the automobile industry will be selected and paid well if he contributes to the fulfillment of the industry's part of the plan. As we shall see, in the Marxian view it is the retention of this material-gain incentive system that more than anything else marks socialism as the first or lower stage of collectivism and differentiates it from communism, the higher stage.

What, then, are the weaknesses and evils of capitalism which it is expected will be removed or cured under socialism? A full list would be long, much too long to be included in the brief space available here. But we can note those which socialists regard as of the greatest importance.

1. *Exploitation of man by man.* Socialists believe that the wealth and income of society are produced by the collective labor of society, and that the existence of a class of owners which reaps far more than a proportionate share by virtue of its ownership and without the necessity to work is *ipso facto* proof of exploitation of workers by owners. The results of this are very far-reaching, going way beyond the extreme inequality of incomes to which it gives rise. All of history shows that exploitation inevitably divides society into hostile classes and degrades not only the exploited but also the exploiters. In such a society,

human brotherhood and solidarity are mere empty slogans impossible of realization. Seeing each other as means rather than ends, human beings become alienated, hostile, and embittered. Socialists consider that overcoming this tragic human condition, which has persisted in various forms for so many millenia, is the first and greatest achievement of socialism.

The abolition of exploitation does not imply the end of all income inequality. The material-gain incentive system, which still characterizes socialism, presupposes and requires differentiated incomes for different kinds and intensity of work. But the extreme and demoralizing forms of income inequality which are such prominent features of capitalism will definitely be done away with. These owe their existence on the one hand to private ownership of the means of production and on the other hand to the destitution which comes from chronic unemployment. As we have already noted, abolition of private ownership of the means of production is of the very essence of socialism, and it will be argued presently that in a comprehensively planned economy there can never be any reason for unemployment as a massive and persistent phenomenon. It follows that a much greater degree of material equality will exist under socialism than under capitalism.

2. *Economic instability and unemployment.* Even when it is performing at its best, capitalism is subject to booms and busts which take a frightful human toll in terms of insecurity and enforced idleness. At other times, as during the 1930's and to an increasing extent in the last few years, a condition of chronic stagnation and continuing mass unemployment is superimposed upon the normal ups and downs of the system. All of this is due to the anarchy of the capitalist market in which millions of individual units make decisions without knowledge or thought of the effect on the whole, to the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few while the great majority are poor, to the planlessness of saving and investment when all decisions are made with a view to private gain rather than public welfare. These are, of course, precisely the conditions and aspects of capitalism which not only can but must disappear with the adoption of a system based on public ownership and planning. Full employ-

ment of human and material resources can be planned for and maintained at all times, and the savings-and-investment process can be so geared as to yield a high or low rate of growth according to society's needs. In the world of today, in which most countries are underdeveloped and most peoples hungry, it is usually taken for granted that something close to the maximum attainable rate of growth is an obvious desideratum. To the extent that this is so, socialism can provide it. What is required is simply a pricing policy which will yield large "profits" to the publicly owned enterprises, and an investment plan which will channel these funds back into expanding society's powers of production. But it should not be overlooked that the planning mechanism is equally adapted to the implementation of entirely different economic policies. Suppose, for example, that a socialist society has built up its productive apparatus to a point where all reasonable needs can be satisfied and it is desired to shift production away from further investment and into rapidly increasing consumption. There are two chief methods which the planners can follow: first, they can lower prices, which will have the effect of reducing "profits" and raising the real incomes of consumers; and second, they can spend a smaller proportion of public revenues on investment and a larger proportion to satisfy society's collective consumption needs (education, recreation, conservation, etc.). Nor is there any reason why automation and other methods for increasing the productivity of human labor should carry with them a threat of unemployment. If, for example, productivity were rising at a rate of x percent a year and further increases of per capita income were not desired, it would only be necessary to reduce hours of work by x percent. The problem for a socialist society in this situation would be to educate its citizens to put their increasing free time to socially and morally worthy purposes. Some socialist thinkers—for example, the eminent British scientist J. D. Bernal—envisage a time when education will be a lifelong process, with more and more of society's human energies being withdrawn from productive pursuits and devoted to teaching on the one hand and studying and learning on the other. But these are more likely to be problems of the higher (communist) stage than of the lower (socialist) stage.

3. *Neglect of public needs.* It has always been true that capitalism has neglected the needs of society which can only be satisfied collectively, but this situation becomes particularly obvious and painful in a society like that of the United States today where education is neglected, resources are wantonly wasted, cities are allowed to turn into slums, and the people's health is left to the whims of private enterprise—while at the very same time a flood of trivial or even harmful goods and services is thrown upon the market, industries operate at 70 to 80 percent of capacity, and unemployment (by the admittedly inadequate official count) averages 6 or more percent of the civilian labor force. This is the ironically named "Affluent Society" in which the private wealth of the privileged stands starkly opposed to the indigence of the many and the neglect of all. Under socialism, by contrast, the pressures to concentrate on private trivia and to neglect public essentials are removed: at long last society can satisfy its collective needs directly from the publicly owned and appropriated surplus of its collective labor.

4. *Finally, the debasement of values and tastes.* As a capitalist society develops and enters the stage of "affluence," it becomes increasingly difficult to dispose of a growing surplus which is appropriated and owned by a relatively few individuals and groups caring only for their own narrow private and class interests. As a result, more and more resources are poured into a burgeoning sales effort. This sales effort, in turn, becomes the dominant factor in shaping the popular culture. The senses and sensitivities of human beings, their intellect and passions, are twisted and manipulated to the service of profitable sales—sales of ever-changing automobile models, of soap powders, of dog foods, of patent medicines and hair creams, of a thousand and one things that people may or may not need but which in any case should serve them as human beings, not dominate their lives and shape their minds. Under socialism, mercifully, this sales effort, multiplying and spreading like an uncontrolled cancer, dies a natural death. There can *never* be a problem of shortage of demand under socialism. Planners can *always* cut prices to clear a market if too much has been produced, and

they can *always* divert resources to other uses or withdraw them from production altogether if a smaller volume of production in the future is indicated. And under socialism, leadership in educating and shaping popular values and tastes—in literature, in the arts, in science, in entertainment—can be assigned to those to whom it naturally belongs—the writers, the artists, the scientists, the entertainers, in a word to the people who are equipped by training and experience and interest to exercise leadership for the good of the whole society and not for the sake of selling this or that gadget or nostrum.

Is it a mere unsupported conjecture that socialism can eliminate these grave weaknesses and evils of capitalism, or is the theory set forth above supported by relevant historical evidence? Evidently, this is much too large a subject to be explored within the confines of a brief lecture. I will, however, indicate my own view which is, I think, that of the great majority of socialists all over the world. We believe that on each of the issues selected for particular mention, the actual experience of the USSR and the other socialist countries of Eastern Europe and Asia lends strong confirmation to the theory. In the socialist third of the world, exploiting classes of capitalists and landlords no longer exist, and the extremes of inequality have been eliminated. There have been no cyclical depressions, no stagnation of production, no mass unemployment. Collective consumption—especially in the fields of education and health—has been enormously increased relative to private consumption. And public morals and standards have been steadily if slowly raised, not lowered and debased by mass media of communication geared to the needs of the cash register. There is of course no implication that everything is perfect in the socialist countries, or that weaknesses and evils of other kinds do not exist. Quite to the contrary. Nothing is ever perfect in human affairs, and one has only to read critically what the socialist countries have to say about themselves to understand that weaknesses and evils still abound. What is maintained is that the specific weaknesses and evils which have been discussed above, and which have been associated with capitalism wherever it has appeared, have either disappeared from the socialist world or are clearly of

declining importance. *In these respects*, much has been achieved in a relatively short time and starting from a very low base. It would be legitimate to conclude from this experience, I think, that socialism in an already developed country like the United States could achieve much more in an even shorter time.

Let us now turn to the question of the advance from socialism to communism, remembering that communism presupposes socialism and is unthinkable except as a further development of forces and tendencies which are released and set into full motion under socialism.

The basic condition for the advance to communism is a tremendous increase in the productivity of human labor. Scarcity as it has existed in the world up to now—and as it has been taken for granted by the science of economics—must be perhaps not altogether abolished but at any rate greatly reduced. And of course this can be accomplished only as a result of a considerable period of rapid technological advance, improvement of living standards, rebuilding of physical environments, etc. These are, from an historical point of view, the specific tasks of the socialist stage. The transition to the communist stage will be gradual and may occupy a period measured in decades rather than years. It will be marked by fundamental changes, of which we may single out for mention the following:

(1) The attitude toward labor will change. This is not only desirable; it is also absolutely necessary for the functioning of an economy which has largely solved the problem of scarcity. If everyone enjoys an income high enough to satisfy all his reasonable needs—perhaps mostly distributed in the form of free goods and services*—very few will be motivated to work simply for the sake of earning money. They must work because they want to or because they feel it to be their social duty. In the communist stage, as Marx put it, “labor has become not merely a means to live but has become itself the primary necessity of

* Free distribution involves very substantial economies and can therefore make a not unimportant contribution to solving the problem of scarcity. Only think, for example, how large a part of the cost of telephone service at the present time is incurred because of the need to keep track of all calls, bill customers, and so on. If telephone service were free, all of this footless paperwork could be dispensed with.

life.”* But this implies very far-reaching changes in the character of the labor performed by most workers. Many categories of jobs must be eliminated altogether (e.g. coalmining and domestic service), and insofar as possible all jobs must become interesting and creative as only a few are today. The ideal situation, of course, is that everyone should find satisfaction and enjoyment in work. To the extent that this is an unattainable goal, everyone must perform a certain amount of labor as a social duty, just as at the present time in most nations the whole population, or some specified part of it, is subject to military service as a social obligation.

(2) Social divisions such as those connected with the different modes of life in city and country will be eliminated. This does not mean that everyone will live exactly like everyone else, only that living conditions, cultural opportunities, etc., will be equally favorable for all. Similarly, the great present-day social division between mental and manual labor will have to be overcome. In part, this can be achieved by the progressive elimination of many categories of manual labor and the proliferation of categories of mental labor—a trend which is already in operation—and in part it will require that at some time in his life everyone should participate in both kinds of labor.

(3) Distribution of income will not be according to productivity but according to need. Whereas in the socialist stage, the principle of distribution will be “from each according to his ability, to each according to his work”; in the communist stage, it will be “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” This is already touched upon in what was said above in connection with the necessity for a changed attitude toward labor, but it has to be emphasized and what it implies has to be spelled out. Above all, “needs” in this context must not and cannot be interpreted in what may be called the Madison Avenue sense of the term. In capitalist society, the consumer is supposed to “need” not only the necessities and comforts of life but also an infinite accumulation of luxuries—several motor cars, a town house and two or more country

* Karl Marx, *The Critique of the Gotha Program*, Sect. I.

estates, a yacht, etc., etc. What prevents consumers from satisfying these "needs" is only a shortage of the necessary purchasing power. As productivity increases and incomes rise, presumably everyone will be able to satisfy more and more of his "needs": the capitalist's utopia would then be a society in which everyone lived like one of today's Texas oil millionaires. Actually, this whole conception is an absurd contradiction in terms. The lavish scale on which the wealthy live under capitalism is possible only because they are able to command, directly and indirectly, the services of a far more numerous class of relatively poor people. In addition, much of their consumption is what Veblen called conspicuous waste, designed only to advertise their wealth and to arouse the envy of their countrymen. In a society of equals—one in which everyone stands in the same relation to the means of production and has the same obligation to work and to serve the common welfare—all "needs" that emphasize the superiority of the few and involve the subservience of the many will simply disappear and will be replaced by the needs of liberated human beings living together in mutual respect and cooperation.

Perhaps it will occur to some of you that what I am describing is not so much a new society as a new human being—one who expresses himself through his work, recognizes his responsibilities to society, respects and supports his fellows, and wants only what he needs to live a cultured life in a civilized environment. Am I not saying that communism will come into being and will prove viable to the extent that it is a society made up of human beings of this description? Yes, I am saying that. But I am saying more than that too: I am saying that the evolution of socialism will in due course *create* such human beings and precisely in that way will transform itself into communism. The society and the human beings who compose it constitute a dialectical whole: neither can change without changing the other. And communism as an ideal comprises both a new society and a new man.

In closing, allow me to quote a famous passage from Marx's celebrated *Critique of the Gotha Program*:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving

subordination of individuals under division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished, after labor has become not merely a means to live but has become itself the primary necessity of life, after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois rights be fully left behind and society inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.

That was written nearly a century ago, but the intervening years have done nothing to dim its brilliance. Karl Marx's conception of the communist society of the future is still the most humane and generous perspective that has been given to a suffering world, and today there are many more millions than ever before striving to make it a reality.

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