



SOCIALISM AND POLITICAL ATAVISM

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Socialists have always liked to present themselves as believing in a creed of rational progress. Ultimately this progress will allow them to attain the ideal socialist society where inequality and hardship have been abolished. In primitive religious belief this same state of untainted paradise is also believed in. This ideal state is, however, not considered to be a goal towards which man should strive to advance towards but a primary human state from which man has fallen. Significantly, the reason for this fall from grace is usually that man has shown such wicked qualities as a quest for self knowledge or scientific curiosity. In Christian mythology Adam and Eve are cast out of the blissful garden of Eden once they have eaten from the tree of knowledge. In Greek mythology Prometheus is punished by the gods for the gift of the elementary technology of fire to man. The significance of this myth is stressed by the fact that archaeological evidence suggests that it was control of fire which allowed man to leave the trees and live on the ground, thus crossing the threshold between human and animal life. In the

Greek legend of Pandora, her fatal flaw for which she is punished by the gods is curiosity. The values of enquiry and the attainment of knowledge so reviled in these myths have allowed men to progress beyond the primitive by way of true capitalist "progress". Hayek has stressed the fact that the morality governing socialism is a throwback to primitivism. Socialism as a political programme is an attempt to drag modern man back into a world governed by reactionary imperatives. Despite all its denials, the anti-modern nature of socialism is betrayed again and again by its worship of the past and its latent mysticism.

THE CULT OF ANTIQUITY IN THE AGE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

In *The Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the ideological father of the revolutionary Jacobins, glorified the primitive as living in a state of natural harmony unrestrained by the artificial laws of civilization. Rousseau sought a return to the instincts which governed the primitive which would manifest themselves as a "general will" of the people.¹ Rousseau's hostility to civilization and its accompanying rule of law is shown when, at the start of his work *Emile*, he states "God made all things good: man meddles with them and they become evil."² Rousseau's admiration for that which was natural and disdain for civilization was mirrored by the cult of naturalism found in French art of the period. French painting of the pre-revolutionary period (such as *The Oath of the Horatii* by Jacques Louis David) praised virtuous classical heroes while Sallust's history, the *Conspiracy of the Catalines*, sought to explain the decline of the Roman Republic by reference to the corrupting power of riches and loss of original patriotic

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virtue.³ When one of the districts of revolutionary Paris, Cordeliers, sought to find a classical parallel for its government the example it chose was significantly not the commercial and democratic state of Athens but the non-urban military and theocratic dictatorship of Sparta.⁴ With such backward looking examples it should be of no surprise that the process of industrialization and modernization which had been advancing under the last of the Bourbons should have suffered almost half a century of retardation while its rival, Britain was in the throes of the Industrial Revolution.⁵

SAINT-SIMON: TECHNOCRACY AND SPIRITUALISM

To Saint-Simon, the eighteenth century French Proto-Socialist, the French revolution despite its destructive qualities would be the precursor of a period of European wide scientific creativity. In the new order that Saint-Simon planned society would be governed by a hierarchical group of technocrats known as, the Council of Newton. The power of the Council would be international and in 1814, in collaboration with the historian Augustin Thierry, he wrote *Of The Reorganisation Of European Society*, which set out his ideas for a federal Europe dominated by French ideas of Revolutionary rationality and English industrial organisation. (Saint-Simon could not, of course, understand that English industrial success was based on ideas of economic and social liberty which were directly opposed to French revolutionary ideas.) For all its talk of progress, Saint-Simon's vision was reactionary and atavistic from the first. Saint Simon was a direct descendent of Charlemagne and his political mission was revealed to him when the Medieval emperor appeared to him in a mystical vision. In *Letters of an Inhabitant of Geneva* (1802) he glorified the aristocratic paternalism of the middle ages. The "Council of Newton" was to be a new aristocracy - a return to medievalism. Increasingly the doctrines espoused by Saint-Simon became dominated by spiritual irrationalism. His last and unfinished work was *The New Christianity* (Saint-Simon died in 1825) which called for a new religion based on science to give spiritual compulsion for the elite to look after the poor in a modern society. Saint-Simon died in poverty but his ideas were deeply influential on the development of later socialist thought.

After Saint-Simon's death his followers continued to develop his ideas. Their principles were increasingly communistic (including the abolition of private property and the collectivisation of society) and involved the development of Saint-Simon's socialist religion. Prosper Enfantin, one of Saint-Simon's disciples, declared himself to be the messiah of the new religion and set up a commune from which such ideas could spread to the working classes. This religious experiment was, however, short lived and Saint-Simonism as a politico-religious doctrine failed.⁶

THE BRITISH SOCIALIST MYSTICS

William Blake (1757-1827) was a British poet and radical thinker who, unlike other writers of the period that witnessed the French revolution, was not disillusioned with the idea of revolt. Blake expressed his social criticism in terms of mystical poetry. The corpus of this poetry came to represent a coherent system of prophetic belief. According to Blake there were four levels of human existence, ranging from Eden (paradise) to Ulro (the lowest of all states of man, dedicated to material wealth and cash). The forces which can raise man up to Eden are named by Blake as Los (imagination) and Luvah (emotion). Opposed to these is Urizen - the force of intellect - whom Blake identifies with Satan. Blake names three false prophets of Urizen - Bacon, Newton and Locke. In his work *Jerusalem* Blake crowned his myth by stating that in the end Urizen and all his works (modern industrial society) would be swept away by the awakening of Albion (a mythical giant representing the rising up of the people of Britain). Blake's contemporary and fellow radical poet, Shelley, uses a similar metaphor for revolution when in the *Mask of Anarchy* (1819) he calls on the workers to "Rise like lions after slumber". Here once again, however, the radical poet is looking backwards to a primitive Golden Age where "the old laws of England" will be restored.⁷

The initial phases of the work of the British Socialist Robert Owen (1771-1858) appear to be practical and rational. He attempted to found and run factory/communities along his own lines of enlightened socialist despotism. The first of these communities was at New Lanark in Scotland, but from 1824 onwards he was also founding communities in America (the first of which was called New Harmony). As each of these small scale socialist experiments failed Owen's plans became more grandiose with his publication of *The Book of the New Moral World* as a blue-print for moral and spiritual revolution. Before his death in 1858 Owen had become involved with the increasingly popular nineteenth century fashion for mysticism. During such mystic seances Owen believed himself to be visited by long dead acquaintances.⁸

One place where such nineteenth century mysticism found influential adherents was within the Fabian Society, founded in 1884. Some of these people were influenced by eastern religions (as popularised by Edwin Arnold in the *Light of Asia*). The most famous of these was Annie Besant, who left the Fabians to become active in Anarchist politics and the head of the occult Theosophist sect. The Theosophist doctrines were not only attractive to socialists but also became antecedent to Fascist doctrines. Such strange coincidences were not uncommon within the Fabian Society. In 1901 Sydney Webb of the Fabian Society formed a group called the Coefficients as the em-

bryonic core of a new Social Imperial Party. Much of the proposed programme of this grouping was virtually identical with the programme of the British Union of Fascists. In 1888, another Fabian, Edward Carpenter, read a paper to the society entitled *Civilisation: Its Cause And Cure*. He argued that a past golden age existed when man had been “whole”. This wholeness had been destroyed by civilization and modernity.⁹

MARX AND ENGELS

Norman Cohn has suggested a lineage of Marxian ideas stretching back to millenarian ideas current in the middle ages. These ideas involved the creation of a paradise on earth which would be a recreation of the state of man before the fall. The cleansing of the world of all that was corrupt and materialistic could only be achieved by violence.¹⁰ More directly, however, it has been suggested that Saint-Simonian Scientific-Spiritual thought may have been more influential on Marx than that of Hegel.¹¹ It is perhaps significant that some of Marx’s earliest writing was made up of poetry on romantic, apocalyptic and mystical themes. In the poem *Oulanem* he wrote “I must bind myself to a wheel of flame and dance with joy in the circle of eternity! If there is a something which devours I’ll leap within it, though I bring the world to ruins”. By evolving a theory of “scientific” and rational materialism Marx was masking the irrational element of his belief system in an age when, with Darwin amongst others attacking many religious orthodoxies, religious faith was no longer adequate as a legitimiser of belief. The pseudo-religious element of Marxian belief is, however, never far below the surface of his writings. The guiding force behind the advance to the new order is now in Marxian theory the power of History. In their historical analysis set out by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1883) it is proposed that a prototype for the post-revolutionary society could be found in the prehistoric past where a situation of “Primitive Communism” existed without class struggle or economic and social inequality. A note on this golden age was added to the 1888 English edition of the *Communist Manifesto*. Evidence for this state of primitive communism was drawn from a book by the American anthropologist Lewis H. Morgan called *Ancient Society* (1877). The book examined the American Indian Iroquois society of the seventeenth century, alleging that it was one of peaceful, equality based on communal property. The irony of these observations was that in the eighteenth century the word Iroquois was used in England as a bye-word for savagery.¹² Engels in *Anti-Dühring* (1877) elaborated on how the return to nature in the future society would take place. There would be an “abolition of antithesis between town and country”. He went on to foretell that “the great towns will perish”. In *German Ideology* Marx wrote of how the

setting up of the “Communal Domestic economy” would mean the “supercession of town and country”. On the individual level this would mean the end to all division of labour and specialisation. Instead there would be a rural idyll where [society] “makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening.”¹³

In reality, when revolutionaries following Marxian principles did triumph in Russia in 1917, the result was not a return to nature but an intensified industrialisation and urbanisation. Soviet socialism has been criticised on this basis as not being “real” socialism and a betrayal of Marxist ideals. Contrary to the suggestions of these socialist purists this betrayal of Marxian principles is the only redeeming feature of the murderous reality of the Soviet Union. It is useful to examine those twentieth century Communist movements which have retained a belief in going back to a simple state of nature and a strain of messianic mysticism.

MYSTIC COMMUNISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The inner core (the Angka Loeu or higher organisation) of the Khmer Rouge, which seized power in Cambodia in 1975, had absorbed the ideas of a primitive rural golden age from a variety of sources. They were influenced by Marxist Maoist ideas but had also absorbed the French ideas of Rousseau’s glorification of the “state of nature”. These foreign ideologies were mixed with a desire to revive the glories of the medieval Khmer empire which had dominated Indo-China a thousand years previously. In their attempt to realise these aims the Khmer Rouge embarked upon a frenzied attempt to destroy modernity in which more than a million people were murdered in two years. The reign of terror only ended when the medieval fantasies of the Khmer Rouge foundered on the modern military superiority of their former Vietnamese allies, who overthrew the Angka Loeu cadres.

The Sendero Luminosa (“Shining Path”), fighting against the Peruvian government, like the Khmer Rouge takes its inspiration from the doctrines of Mao. Mao’s traditions are, however, combined with Peruvian Indian millenarianism. The movement is anti-western and anti-modern and seeks a return to Indian tradition. Its origins are shrouded in legendary mystique. In the late nineteenth century there was an uprising of Peruvian Indians against the government. The rebellion was put down and the bodies of its executed leaders were dismembered. According to legend, however, when buried under the earth the parts of the bodies grew back together until the dead leaders were able to rise again. The Sendero Luminosa were the material manifestation of this supernatural process. The Sendero Luminosa have distinguished

themselves by their brutality in their war against all that do not agree with their apocalyptic vision.

This mixture of hard line communism with atavistic superstition is again found in South Africa. Here the group of comrades allegedly fighting for a rational and progressive society make frequent use of revived practices of ancient sorcery and witchcraft (known as “muti”) to protect them in battle against their enemies. In Europe the communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania justified his rule not only by reference to the triumph of international communism but also and more obscurely to the destiny of the Romanian people due to their descent from Roman legions who had invaded the country a thousand years previously.

Socialism in all these cases is a reaction to a crisis. It offers a future of closed collective certainty. Mysticism and mythology offer a return to ancient certainties. Ancient and modern collectivism merge to offer a circular, closed vision of society. Such a vision of collectivism is at its most powerful when the ideas that it proposes have the sanction of religious legitimisation.

THE DEATH OF THE OPEN SOCIETY

When the open society based on rational beliefs and institutions comes under successful attack from such collectivism it is often the case that such collectivist beliefs permeate society far beyond the immediate reaches of the revolutionary party. When the open society no longer believes in its own values and will not fight to defend them then its destruction is easily achieved by a well organised collectivist organisation. In eighteenth century France the ideas of Rousseau formed the ideological core of the ideas of Robespierre’s Jacobins but an admiration for naturalism and virtue had spread throughout the whole of the French intelligensia. Even Marie-Antoinette in 1782 visited Rousseau’s grave and her model “farm” maintained at Versailles was another aspect of the cult of nature.¹⁴

In Russia under the last Tsar the reverence given in the royal court to Rasputin, the peasant holy man, may be seen as an attempt to remain in touch with an aspect of old Russia untouched by modernity. (At the same time Stolypin was attempting to create a progressive class of individualist peasant farmer—the Kulaks.)¹⁵ When Marx was to choose an ideal model for the organisation of rural society he used the “commune” of “old Russia” as an example of egalitarian peasant organisation. In reality the commune was a means by which rural landlords maintained their ideological control over the peasantry.¹⁶ In these two examples the idealisation of a mythical past by the revolutionary theorist and the royal family show how weak was any support for the real pre-revolutionary Russia. The overthrow of the Tsarist regime by the

Bolsheviks was, according to Trotsky, “like a strong man striking a paralytic.”

THE HISTORICAL DIVIDE: INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM

Hayek has made the case that the population of the world owes its very existence to capitalist system based on individualistic morality. An economic and demographic divide has been crossed, away from the closed economic system where a primitive collectivist morality was able to operate.¹⁷ To attempt to recross that divide has catastrophic consequences for humanity. Examples of such disasters which follow surrender to longings for a mythical irrational past have occurred in France in 1789, Russia in 1917 and Germany in 1933. For all the examples of collectivism’s failure which can be drawn from history it retains a psychological appeal to humanity which has not as yet outgrown its longings for a past dominated by collectivism, hierarchy and myth.

NOTES

1. Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1989, pp. 161-162.
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3. Schama, pp. 162-174.
4. Bertrand de Jouvenal, *Power: The Natural History of Its Growth*, Anchor, London, 1945, p. 86.
5. A. L. Rowse, “The Price of Revolution”, *Salisbury Review*, December 1988, pp. 4-7.
6. Edmund Wilson, *To The Finland Station*, Macmillan, London, 1940, pp. 82-88, 100-103.
7. Geoffrey Ashe, *Camelot and the Vision of Albion*, Heinemann, London, 1971, pp. 155-198.
8. Brian Crozier, *Socialism: Dream and Reality*, Sherwood Press, London, 1987, pp. 3-5.
9. This section concerning the Fabians draws upon Ashe, pp. 199-200, and (for reference to the “Co-efficients”) Robert Skidelsky, *Oswald Mosley*, Macmillan, London, 1975, p. 58.
10. Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millenium*, Secker and Warburg, London, 1957, *passim*.
11. F. A. Hayek, “Saint-Simonian Influence”, in *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, Liberty Press, Indianapolis, 1979, pp. 291-323.
12. Horace Walpole speaking of France during the French revolution says: “Isn’t France the most Iroquois of nations?” Quoted in A. L. Rowse, “Post-Mortem on the French Revolution: A Contemporary English Reaction”, *Salisbury Review*, December 1989.
13. Quoted in Leslie R. Page, *Karl Marx and the Critical Examination of His Works*, Freedom Association, London, 1987.
14. Schama, p. 156.
15. Edward Crankshaw, *The Shadow of the Winter Palace*, Macmillan, London, 1976, p. 372.
16. Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow*, Arrow, London, 1986, p. 22.
17. F. A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1988.