

*Functionally*  
**The Question of Socialism: ~~A~~ Development  
Failure or ~~an~~ Ethical Defeat? *by* Teodor**

**Shanin**

*To the memory of  
Rephael Samuel*

By now it would be nearly trivial to say that the recent events in the USSR and Eastern Europe have been so surprising, so far-reaching and so complex as to make all efforts at their explanation look disturbingly inadequate and pale. The same applies if we consider those events as arising from the initial experiment with socialist statehood within a Russian core and its political peripheries. Too much has happened too fast for us to grasp it all. But the most substantive roots of this felt inadequacy lie in the failure of all available predictions to indicate what was actually in store. In so far as tools of the scholars' trade failed entirely to prepare us for the things to come - things we see now directly - how can they give us true illumination after the event?

In making sense of this fundamental message of experience and doubt one can opt for the known and taken for granted, or choose to 'throw in the towel', at least temporarily, as far as analysis is concerned, or else start again and look for a new *different*

way of approaching the issue. To stay with the known points of departure, basic questions, and tools of intellectual trade - within a Kuhn's 'paradigm'\* (or in justice 'paradigms') - is not, of course, to stay put, irresponsive to events. New evidence <sup>should</sup> would be absorbed, old queries and conclusions would shift, to conform better with events. An alternative assumption that the social content of such transformation naturally overflows all explanatory concepts, that one can watch revolutionary upheavals but that their rationales and determinations must escape their immediate observers, <sup>could</sup> would also carry its own useful agenda. To focus on recording and categorizing what happens, whatever its explications, is particularly useful during the 'days of the flood', in politics and perceptions alike. A third <sup>possible</sup> approach, the attempt to understand the unexpected through considering the questions unasked, would thus appear as a parallel effort with no monopoly on useful results. But it is a necessary one if we are to deal with the central experience of scholars faced with societies and histories they studied and preached about for so

and ended up with  
long - overwhelming puzzlement

Raphael Samuel's editorial (*HWJ* 29, Spring 1990), 'The Russian Question', did an admirable job along the first of the epistemological roads suggested. Empathy with the <sup>official line of the</sup> Soviet socialist project enabled him to bridge the gap and address the current emotions and perceptions of many Soviet historians. His short narrative began by taking on board the issue of the collapse of belief in the 'dignity of <sup>our</sup> their cause'. Then it brought the events of 1989 face to face with available explanations. In particular, it linked the current crisis to Russia's history, tracing continuity and contradictions from the Mongol origins of Russia's statehood to the *nomenklatura*, <sup>at one time</sup> from the debates of Westerners and Slavophiles in the nineteenth century to the realities of the USSR today, from the China-Soviet split to how nationalisms divided.

the formally 'internationalist' and Marxist Soviet commonwealth. It also brought into the picture a radical historiographic vision or hypothesis in which the October revolution <sup>has been constructed</sup> was a distraction from historical progress - a transitory aberration. It <sup>he</sup> concluded that the universal spread of acceptance of 'capitalism with a consumer face' was central to the multiplicity of events in current history. It <sup>then</sup> explained the dissolution of East European regimes, the <sup>end</sup> decline of the USSR, the relative stability of 'the West'; and, more implicitly, the debt trap and social polarization, the dictatorships, populisms and Islamic revivalism elsewhere. One can add <sup>has</sup> a 'domino theory' of the weakening of the Soviet Union with a knock-on effect on Eastern Europe (which would explain the sequence of events, however, rather than their nature).

It is important to point out here that for all the loud cries of 'how splendid!', 'we told you so', and 'it's human nature, is it not?', the capitalist triumphalism of the western press and intellectual Right offered little additional explanation of the events it cheered. It simply put glee where most of the intellectual Left put sadness and dismay.

This difference of emotions accepted, the Right/Left similarity of reasoning is actually less surprising than it seems. Their explanations exposed the heuristic limits of a paradigm of a political economy and of the practice of power-holding, whether aimed at 'development and growth' through 'capital investment' or through 'application of science'. This paradigm, in its essentials, was largely shared by Left and Right alike. It is in this context that a major section of the intellectual Left assumed that 'actually existing socialisms' - the political universe established by communist parties - would eventually be able to deliver the goods better than capitalism and to outrun it in provision of material welfare. ~~It was that view plus the assumption of eventual egalitarianism based on endless riches~~ which came to be defined by them as socialism. <sup>and with them "believe" in the right future</sup> A Social Democrat alternative added and contrasted to it the need for a democratic procedure and, possibly, for a permanent compromise between 'welfarist' <sup>the</sup> services and capitalist wealth-making. The anti-socialists assumed the necessary failure of any efforts to restrict egoism, seeing it as the engine

of <sup>the process</sup> ~~the process~~ The context of the argument concerning the viability of socialism (and <sup>of</sup> ~~of~~ 'the competition of the Capitalist and the Socialist regimes', to use <sup>an</sup> ~~an~~ often repeated term), was set out accordingly in the 1930s and again in the 1950s/70s.

As it happened, Soviet industrialization indexes in the 1930s appeared to <sup>contain</sup> ~~catch up~~ <sup>or</sup> with those of Western industrial societies locked in the post-1929 depression. Also, the USSR was 'politically stable' - that is, <sup>it is</sup> ~~is~~ ruled by Stalin. Later, the 1941-5 war was interpreted <sup>as</sup> ~~as~~ yet another element of USSR's successful competition with capitalism. From the late 1950s another stage, one of 'peaceful competition' between global systems, proceeded to unfold, showing remarkable similarity in <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ indexes used and the goals declared on all sides Internationally, <sup>there</sup> ~~it~~ was the struggle for the Third World 'hearts and minds' in ~~securing global supremacy~~ which then came particularly to the fore. The Second World of officially socialist states - the communist project - for a time seemed to be ~~ahead~~, and ~~to~~ offer a model programme for a Third World <sup>of</sup> ~~of~~ its kinsmen-in-social-conditions. But at the next step

seems obvious. Or was it made to look this way by the nature of the intellectual apparatus and the assumptions involved?

*The Question of Socialism*

*of the development of the idea?*

What has been this 'intellectual apparatus'? It was established in the great codification of social sciences *cum* 'historical materialism' *cum* 'orthodox Marxism' within the second International (even though one can challenge how far the Marxism of this Engels/Kautsky/Plekhanov line of interpretation was really Marxian) As we have suggested, it shared with the mainstream of anti-socialist social sciences a *basic* political economy which combined super-optimistic and 'progressist' historiography with a positivistic epistemology. For the majority of socialists in Europe and its cultural dependencies elsewhere it was based on a fundamental 'materialism': total belief in economic interests of individuals and groups as the <sup>one</sup> basic determinant of social history and human action as well as the key to understanding <sup>it</sup> them. The world of ideas was treated as epiphenomenal. This view also assumed an inevitable human evolution, guided by all-answering science, from poverty to unlimited wealth and from subjection

To begin at the beginning-what did actually happen? There had been stagnation and growing economic crisis in the countries of COMECON. And there were the grand changes in the USSR and the 1989 collapse of political regimes in Eastern Europe. But simple explanation of the second by the first should not be taken for granted. The decline of the Communist Party rule was as evident and profound in

Czechoslovakia, with its steadily supplied shops and no manifest economic downturn, as in Poland, Romania and the USSR, where supplies ran short and <sup>failure of effort to get up with the world</sup> privation was becoming increasingly apparent. Indeed, if deprivation and increasing shortages can of themselves demolish political regimes, why did it not happen earlier, for instance in the USSR of 1933, 1942 or of the late 1970s, and elsewhere as in IMF-squeezed Mexico or Tanzania since 1982? And why did the current <sup>(19)</sup> sharp decline of real income of the Poles not produce <sup>just common</sup> any real challenge to the new rulers of Poland? How does all this fit the simplicities of the sausage-shortage explanation of East European history?

It does not. Not because people do not care about sausages or do not become furious when the queues grow and sausage is not to be had. But only rarely have material worries and needs on their own made people choose and act the way they did in Eastern Europe and the USSR in 1989. This has been particularly true when fundamental transformations of societies took place. Human perception and cognition have never been epiphenomenal, they display their own dynamic

which feeds into the causalities of human history  
This is why the 'pure' materialism behind most  
explanations in <sup>the</sup> terms of the available political  
economy has been unrealistic. A 'moral  
economy' (in the sense given to it by the works of  
E P. Thompson and Jim Scott) must be taken on  
board to make sense also of Eastern Europe and  
the USSR of 1989. It was mass indignation and  
not mass hunger which made radicals there go on  
the offensive, drew masses of people into protest  
and broke the resolve of the rulers to hang on,  
come what may

Let us consider the issue of the moral crisis and  
collapse of the 'actually existing socialisms',  
relating it to the gap between the socialist  
assumptions of the regimes and the realities  
known to all. Its existence was, up to a point and  
for a time, condoned and explained away by faith  
that "the gap" would naturally close, <sup>and</sup> that the  
glorious aims would come to coincide with the  
actual life of those working for them. But the gap  
did not close, indeed, it became a challenge  
which in time not only produced the onslaught of  
a new revolution, but, more importantly to the  
outcome, the collapse of the resolve and self-

assurance of the rulers The economic crisis was there but its demolishing impact lay mainly in the fact that it offered yet another proof of the distance between promises and reality, the model and the actuality, as legitimization <sup>by</sup> ~~through~~ <sup>hope</sup> trust in a better future went down the drain.

Comparison with the West in terms of income and welfare undermined the East European regimes. But this needs to be seen together with the public awareness of 'hardening' privileges of an elite in a world which proclaimed equality, with the daily suppression of original thought in a world which declared itself the pinnacle of human culture, with daily lies about the absolute superiority of the USSR over 'the bourgeois West'. There was also growing awareness of the stodgy clerks in long black cars who failed to command respect even from their personal chauffeurs and yet spoke for the working class, the ultimate science, the nation, <sup>or</sup> ~~and~~ the humanity at large. This is the context in which, while there were neither shortages nor street gunfire in Prague, Budapest and Leipzig, their citizens waved their placards and rattled their keys in the faces of their rulers. Once they did this the secret

was out: behind the facade of obedient bureaucracies, strict ideologies and all-powerful regimes, there was emptiness: a few old men who had lost faith in their own regime and had nobody to defend it until death. And while there were still many thousands of people with direct 'material' interest in keeping the regimes and their systems of

privileges afloat, and many guns in henchmen's hands, only in Romania were <sup>on the</sup> shots fired. Elsewhere in Eastern Europe the <sup>83</sup> communist regimes of 'actual existing socialism' ~~dissolved~~ <sup>and</sup> fell apart as a fruit rotten to the core falls off <sup>the</sup> tree

Which leads us to the next fundamental question: what was this socialism of theirs which came to grief so dramatically and so surprisingly? Following the chosen road we shall focus on the issues of human cognition and perception - the place where in our view the events under discussion essentially took shape We may present it in terms of the relation between a mask and a dogma on the one hand, and human reality on the other, of an official self-image - <sup>this of</sup> 'scientific socialism' as established by Kautsky's erudition <sup>OR</sup> and Stalin's brutality <sup>as</sup> ~~up~~ against the human substance of ~~the~~ socialisms, that is, the actual <sup>choices</sup> drives, tendencies and impacts of socialists involved in political action. As to the dogma and the mask, of which we have already spoken, they are still to be found in the depiction of the future set out in the textbooks of Eastern Europe and the USSR. <sup>To the delusion</sup> <sup>which has been</sup> Socialism is the ~~beginning~~ of the final

stage of unilinear ascent to an ultimate society of humans whose desires are all met and who, once the state has 'withered away', like gods run themselves. To be a socialist <sup>future</sup> therefore <sup>now</sup> is to recognize the inevitable and to speed it up with the help of a scientific outlook and of a disciplined admiration for the leaders and prophets of socialism who marked out the future road. To <sup>what is left</sup> be a socialist is to help remove obstacles from the road of inevitable progress, that is, to fight for the defeat of backwardness in institutions, backwardness in humans, and humans who are backward. This is why, in the words of Kautsky, 'social development stands higher than the interest of the proletariat and of the Social Democracy', an idea which Stalin carried out according to his lights. This is the frame <sup>logic</sup> in which the view that 'freedom is recognition of necessity' made perfect sense. Ethics becomes but a recognition of and service towards the inevitable progress. Any other attitude to <sup>ethics</sup> morality is utopian sentimentalism and/or a legacy of prescientific thought and hence, of course, 'petty bourgeois'. (This establishes by default an image of a 'proletariat' of purists and

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scientists as a final arbiter of history and truth )

*In Feb 44* All this was deception or self-deception. Some used it as an explicit lie - to gain promotion and power under a regime and/or within institutions in which such tactics worked. But for others, the millions of true believers whose readiness for sacrifice in the service of socialist ideals made them *for a time* into a potent political force (and tested daily the genuine nature of their beliefs), the scientificity-and-progress self-definition was simply untrue, indeed, acted as a peculiar self-slander. In fact, the people who supported socialism and became its most effective activists did so mostly out of moral compulsion - an applied ethic of right and wrong in political and daily behaviour - to which personal interest and enhancement *was* must be subordinate. Some supported socialism also out of a particular aesthetic in the way they viewed humans and human endeavour - a kind of beauty *seen as* assumed and set as a goal. That is why they gained adherents even amongst the best and brightest within the privileged classes of the society, especially its intellectual circles and its youth. This is *also* why they also gained so often the grudging personal respect

of their ideological foes, whose terms of invalidation for radical socialists - the claim of their lack of realism about 'human nature' - carried a peculiar admission of the socialists' moral superiority. At its core, socialism as a social phenomenon has not been a logical system, however profound. Nor has it necessarily been what socialists thought of themselves. The essence of socialism was the reason why and the way in which socialists were active, turning them into a powerful political force which shaped human history. *For a time*

Importantly, and relatedly, the socialists were also never 'the party of the proletariat'. To be sure, industrial workers have often supported socialists, appreciating the way their effort and workers' interests run in parallel. But this was not always so in terms of the workers' socialism, the socialists' acceptance of workers' explicit wishes or the workers' substantive participation in socialist parties and movements. There were of course many who came from the destitute and underprivileged strata of society and joined socialist movements, but even for them the personal decision to revolt rather than to adjust and seek individual enhancement was central to the role they played on the social and political stage. The 'organized labour' of the trade unions aimed mostly at better wages rather than at social transformation into a socialist society. Indeed, a world where everybody would 'look after himself/herself, or their family, or in terms of social class, or ethnicity, or gender, would strictly speaking bring the socialist project and impact to an end.

One more of socialism's ideological masks should go if realism is to determine what we

actually try to understand of the 1989 experience. It is the concept of 'scientific socialism' Perception of technology's failure to catch up with, let alone to lead the world, together with the failure of social policy and planning, <sup>left</sup> ~~did~~ <sup>even</sup> demolish the earlier Soviet self-images of having a privileged access to science on behalf of socialism and the working class and being hence 'the most progressive system on earth' But the crux of <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ matter does not lie in ~~this~~ failure to deliver. The more important point is that the substance of socialism has never been its ability to act as an elixir to stimulate 'development' and ~~the~~ GNP, nor its capacity to reveal the inevitable future to everyone else Socialism as a real human phenomenon has been about the ideas and images of justice. And we have the testimony of the greatest scientist of our century, Albert Einstein, that 'we should be on our guard not to over-estimate science and scientific method when it is a question of human problems'. Science to him could deliver some truth and some results, but goals had to be defined outside its realm. Yet, socialism has been about goals.

The human and social dimension of the ethical

defeat of 'actual existing' socialist regimes has not been much of an issue to the majority of those in the West whose profession it was to interpret Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. All their intellectual training militated against it. The same goes for most of the socialists themselves. Not to expect to see is often not to see. Yet at the very top of the immense effort to provide for a new start in the USSR, in Gorbachev's closest circles, a transformation of perception as to what socialism is has been afoot. It was Alexander Yakovlev, Gorbachev's ideological *alter ego*, who made explicit that the core subject of the intellectual perestroika is, in his definition, the establishment of 'ethical socialism'. He proceeded to explain that the substance of this transformation is the re-focusing of socialism's goals towards universal humanist values. While the Western press have insistently alleged 'repetition of clichés' by the Soviet leadership, in the Soviet Union itself Yakovlev's message was clearly received and understood by friends and enemies alike. Gorbachev and a series of political activists and intellectuals supported it. At the recent Leningrad meeting of the Communist

Party, conservatives singled out the idea of universal humanist values as the centrepiece of revisionist poison and its authors for a special dose of vilification, calling for Gorbachev's and Yakovlev's expulsion from the Communist Party for such treasonable views.

What can be the analytical 'bottom line' of the argument suggested in the face of what Raphael Samuel called 'the wreck of a system in which so many emancipatory

hopes were invested . . . (its) loss of belief in dignity of its own cause'? It is too early to offer summation but some preliminary conclusions can be tabled for consideration. These will include matters of substance and matters of agenda. As to the substance, one can put it best as a number of negatives which do follow from the view offered. First, the capitalist triumphalism of today fails to address the essence of socialist failure. It will therefore end as a transitory hullabaloo rather than an explication of what has been taking place. Second, some current attempts to defend the record of socialism by offering 'development indices' (e g. Cuba's high literacy rates and such like) are also fundamentally beside the point. Why there are privileged shops for the elite in Cuba or the USSR is rather the point to be addressed, or how long people can put up with the frustration of being always told what to do. Thirdly, historical continuities, reflected in the diversity of the forms of statehood adopted, or of the ways national identities are constructed, are of importance for the issue under discussion but are insufficient on their own. One must also consider continuities in collective views concerning

human values This is especially so with the informal dimensions of human thought and action, <sup>92</sup> which to a large degree escape officialdom's control and media pressures That must lead to a research agenda which would call for reconsideration and study of socialism in relation to social ethics and aesthetics focussing not, however, on prescription and dogmas but on the basic issues of why, and how, some people (and who they are) act along lines which cannot be explained by simple and direct reference to self-preservation, self-enhancement, utilitarian greed and fear of punishments Contrary to the self-image most of the <sup>Contemporary</sup> socialist theorists and <sup>have</sup> political leaders adopted, these were the true roots of the socialism of the socialists, and of the transforming capacities it displayed. This is also where it failed, as 1989 showed. The explanation of this defeat and the consideration of socialism's available futures must begin at <sup>the</sup> ~~the~~ roots.

What is not  
clear is  
that