

## Socialism Now

The following text was presented at the international conference in Barcelona on "Models of the Future, New Technologies and Cultural Tradition".

We live today in the epoch of the commodity. The vast amount of wealth produced throughout the world takes the form of goods and services which are marked, which are intended for sale in order to realise a profit. As Karl Marx wrote at the beginning of *Das Kapital*, wealth under the capitalist mode of production "presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities'". In this respect little has changed since his day, except that the buying and selling relationships which characterise the commodity form of wealth production now permeate almost every conceivable form of human activity. To enhance the efficient realisation of surplus value, the dignity of all human relations have had to be further and further debased into the mould of what Thomas Carlyle, as early as 1840, called the "cash payment" nexus. But this form of society has developed only in the most recent fraction of human history and pre-history. The question I intend to pose here is how the commodity society and its culture can be transcended.

In the literary tradition of utopias, the first tendency was to place the social paradise firmly in the distant past, with the implication or hope that through some religious or moral upheaval such a state of grace might one day be returned to. In the first century BC, Ovid wrote in his *Metamorphoses* of the "Golden Age" when "men of their own accord, without threat of punishment, without laws, maintained good faith and did what was right". Likewise, in the fourteenth century AD the English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in his poem *The Former Age* of a time without profit, property or war, but bemoaned the terrible moment when this was spoilt by men digging up "bits of metal in the darkness, Looking for gems in the rivers". The parallel here with the Biblical idea of the Fall is quite apparent. Other medieval utopias added a magical element, such as in the Land of Cockagne where roasted geese would fly through the air advertising themselves by shouting "Geese, all hot! all hot!". In the land of Cockagne,

All is common to young and old  
To stern and haughty, meek and bold...  
For drink there is no need to ask,  
To take it is the only task.

This second type of utopia - set in the author's time but in far-off lands - found its English archetype in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* of 1516. More recently, the principles of social harmony and equality which feature merely as ideals in the early utopias, have become far more tangible possibilities. In the last century the American author, Edward Bellamy (author of *Looking Backward*, 1887) stated revealingly that "The Golden Age lies before us and not behind, and it is not far away". Return to the Garden of Eden has re-emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a real political demand that the earth's resources should become a common storehouse for the benefit of all. As a starting point, however, the literary tradition of utopian vision is of great importance, for in it we

see attempts to explain the property relations which poets like Geoffrey Chaucer clearly regarded as in some way unnatural, artificial and undesirable. In the mythical convention, our social exit from the Garden of Eden coincides historically with the rise of private property and the state. But with the Enlightenment of the Eighteenth Century, there began to develop the possibility of a genuinely scientific basis for translating these poetical myths into anthropological reality. It has since been shown by modern anthropology that, for the majority of the 50,000 years of the species homo sapiens, and for an even greater majority of the evolutionary timespan of our immediate predecessors, there was a complete absence of the modern social relationships which we now take for granted. The political state and the property relationships which have given rise to money simply did not exist.

The conditions of early agriculture, with its fluctuations between scarcity and surplus, appear to have generated the power struggles, with the subsequent evolution of property relations and money. The technology of the late twentieth century, with its potential capability of meeting the needs of the whole population, could lay a foundation for transcending those class relationships of sectional ownership and control, which have evolved during the past few thousand years.

Repeatedly in recent years, statistics from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation have demonstrated that world resources could be sufficient to feed the total world population several times over if fully cultivated. A UN Report of 1970 states that "the surface of the earth has hardly been scratched". The 1976 UNFAO Yearbook found that "enough grain is now produced to provide everyone on earth with more than 2lb. (3000 calories)", and a special issue of Scientific American in September of the same year reported that current resources could meet the needs of twelve times the world population at that time. But the world market system is such that production must be trimmed to match sales potential. For example, we have the quota system which is a fetter on the production of wheat, rice, sugar, coffee, cocoa, rubber, tin and copper, while so many millions are starving or destitute. And this purely to defend the profit margins of companies like Nestles, which has a higher turnover than the Swiss government and spends more on advertising each year than the entire UN World Health Organisation budget (Swiss Information Groups for Development Policy: Nestles Report, 1976). With the removal of this profit barrier, incredible forces of production would be unleashed.

What then of the technology we inherit from the unplanned and uncoordinated leaps and bounds of the world's scientists over recent generations? It has become a cliché to state that today's global distress and dislocation results from the intrinsic nature of the technology itself. This is to mistake substance for present use. With a global transformation of social relationships, in which the capital-labour conflict between owners and nonowners of productive resources would be replaced by production for use under social control, present technology could satisfy all basic material needs. The paradoxes of modern technology have been well summed up by Mike Cooley, who writes, for example, that today's computers objectify the knowledge of skilled workers into push-button machines

so the employer now appropriates part of the worker himself through the intervention of the computer and not just the surplus value of the product. Thus we can say that the worker has conferred "life" on the machine and the more he gives to the machine the less there is left of himself!

At the same time, he re-iterates the warning that no technological design is ever completely independent. "As we design technological systems, we are in fact designing sets of social relationships" (Architect or Bee?, 1980). The key determining factor in the future development and use of this technology will be whether or not the class ownership of these productive resources persists, with its resulting drive for profit and therefore a cheapening of production costs. In a rare comment on what might follow from an abolition of the capitalist law of value, Marx stated that:

In a future society, in which class antagonism will have ceased, in which there will no longer be any classes, use will no longer be determined by the minimum time of production, but the time of social production devoted to different articles will be determined by the degree of their social utility. (Poverty of Philosophy, 1847)

With the nineteenth century evolution of the modern capitalist economy, there arose the demand for an end to "wage slavery". Still, however, there was the assumption of needing to look backward, in the English case to peasant independence prior to the Enclosures of common land. The idea of forward-looking political action and the visionary power of utopians were, however, combined to powerful effect in the late nineteenth century. In the English context this can be seen most clearly in William Morris whose *News From Nowhere* (1890), although often seen as mere romanticism, was in fact intended as a direct inspiration to the socialist movement within which he played such an active role. Drawing equally on the "scientific socialism" of Marx and Engels, and his pre-Raphaelite-based concern with art as creative labour, he set out the possibility of a world in which the money system had been replaced by a democratic community in which wealth was produced purely for use, not for sale, with the many social benefits which flow from that premise. Of course, there are many advances which the present century has been able to add to the insights of nineteenth century revolutionary thought. The Women's Movement, the surge in recent years in awareness of environmental issues, and the increasing understanding that state capitalism is not a step forward but the re-emergence of the same monster under a different guise - all these are major aspects of such advance. But the key contribution made by pioneers like Morris remains as valid and important today - that is, that emancipation must be organised by those who are to be emancipated, and must depend on the consciousness of a majority. There can be no socialism without socialists - indeed, without their being in a clear majority. This logical combining of socialism and democracy as mutually integrated ideas has understandably been so far less well received in Spain, France or Latin America, where anarchist and syndicalist tendencies have been stronger than in England. But the notion of socialism as the ultimate extension of democracy in the economic field, and the idea that means must harmonise with ends in its establishment - these arguments remain compelling in

their logic throughout the world today.

At the turn of the century, the social democratic movement was split between those who believed that the problems of capitalism could only be solved by getting rid of capitalism itself, and those who thought it more practical to wrestle with the effects of the profit system, reforming its problems away one by one. In France, Paul Brousse of the latter tendency boasted of being a "Possibilist", supporting what Karl Popper was later to call "piecemeal social engineering". But the social system we inhabit must at any point in history either be firmly grounded on human interests or based on minority interest, as expressed in the present epoch by the surplus realised through the market sale of commodities. There is not a possibility of compromise between these options of production for profit and production for use. Moreover, human society must either continue to be, or cease to be an organised expression of alienation, in which our powers and capacity to control ourselves and our environment are placed outside of our conscious control. This process, in which the power humanity has to shape its future is externalised or channelled off into some real or imaginary outside force has taken many forms historically. Whether feared and worshipped as "God", elevated into the inevitable as "market forces", put into a uniform, elected or supported as the state forces of an authoritarian government, what we see is humanity as a whole discarding our responsibility for our future by bowing to the transient power relationships which have so far evolved. It was this paradox which the poets referred to above were trying to solve by writing with relish of a "Former Age" of social harmony and one-ness.

It is because of the misery which still prevails that people continue to be so interested in better times and places, whether in the past, the future or the other side of the world. But the old dream of social unity, which must also mean global unity, has now been thrust noisily on to the stage of possibilities as the twentieth century approaches its end. It was the commodity, the production of wealth for profit, which encouraged the building of a world market. This has forged a kind of global unity, but on the fragile foundation of continuing competition. Ironically it is now only by abolishing the commodity form of wealth production, with all its destructive side-effects, and replacing it with production for use, that a real global and social unity can be established.