



NEWS FROM NOWHERE

Homo Economicus

Reading the opinion columns by economic journalists in the *Sydney Morning Herald* I can't help feeling that it is all written by communists. It may seem absurd to suggest that Max Walsh, Robert Haupt, Michael Denholm et al are communists, and before the abovementioned start reaching for the phone to speed-dial their defamation lawyers, let me explain what I mean. Neither these economic-communists nor old style stalinist-communists were ever very big on theoretical specification - and this is not the least thing they have in common.

Both are long on remarkably similar rhetorical devices; both offer a cure-all ideology which explains everything. In stalinist dogma there is supposed to be a difference between utopian and scientific theories about communism, the latter being superior to the former. A closer peek at stalinist rhetoric uncovers the fact that the utopian blueprint has merely been hidden away inside the scientific jargon. The outer surface of this ideology, so to speak, is all hard algebra and touch logic, while the soft-hearted innards contain a vision splendid of the good life hereafter which will result from the logical workings of history plus the vigilant guidance of the party and the plan.

In short, the connection between the rhetoric of science and the utopia of

the good life is a narrative one, a story about how history is supposed to work. The characters who walk about in this story in their ten-league boots are the working class and the party, triumphing over enemies, marching together into the new dawn of prosperity for all. The good life, in Stalin's classic *Economic Problems of the USSR*, is measured in tons of steel and bushels of wheat without any of that namby-pamby goodness and light stuff. This is science, after all. Science which is the sole property of the party, administered through the plan on behalf of homo faber - the workers.

What could this possibly have in common with the economics of Walsh and Haupt? Well, everything, really. In economist dogma, there is also a utopian blueprint hidden away inside the scientific jargon. The outer surface of this ideology, too, is all hard algebra and tough logic, while the soft-hearted innards is a vision splendid of the good life hereafter which will result from the logical workings of the market plus the vigilant guidance of economists and their sagely interventions in favour of deregulation. The connection between the rhetoric of science and the utopia of the good life is a narrative one, a story about how history is supposed to work. The characters who walk about in this story in their shiny new shoes are the investors and the economists, triumphing over enemies, marching together into the new dawn of prosperity for all. The good life, for economists also, is measured in tons of steel, bushels of wheat, and kilos of home entertainment centres — not any of that namby-pamby goodness and light stuff. This is science, after all. Science which is the sole property of the economists, vigilantly overseeing the true workings of the market on behalf of homo economicus.

The structure of these two ideologies is thus pretty much the same. Where they differ is in the masters they serve and the enemies they denounce. In its stalinoid perversion, communism is an ideology which serves the state. In its quirky new economic version, this communist rhetoric of the good life, with pop-up toasters for all, serves capi-

tal. The demonology of stalinism naturally picked on the market as the source of all evil, for the market is ideologically linked to capital. Economism as an ideology can think of nothing more original to do than turn this on its head and denounce regulation. Regulation is the business of the state. Both these ideologies concur in claiming to be on the side of us poor folk with neither state power nor the money power to stand by us, when in reality neither is in our interests at all. This, after all, is what communist ideology is for: to delude otherwise sensible people into thinking that all is well, that acquiescing with the dominant view of things will benefit us and not just the powers that be. The communist promise either way is a good life of more and better things for us to buy and have.

Both the economists and the communists are prepared to make great sacrifices to reach this promised land. They are further prepared to sacrifice us. We all have to chip in for the good of production, be it for the five-year plan or micro-reform. Both want to abolish any complex and messy social relations, cultural hang-overs from the past, safeguards of traditional patterns of life, all in the name of a rational model of the future, the future of the plan or the market — take your pick.

Both have a vision of communist man. The stalinists saw him as a collective entity, a model of perfect altruism. The *Herald's* economists have completely flipped this on its ear. Their model of communist man is a pure atom of individualism, motivated only by self interest. Whether he be homo economicus or homo faber, this model is a reductive one. On the one-dimensional model of man, economists and stalinists build a one-dimensional model of the good life. As we well know, therein lies its terror. The dark satanic mills of old *laissez faire* England could be found just as readily in Stalin's Russia. Needless to say, there is no place for minority cultures in this vision splendid. All will be reduced to equal but opposite norms.

Lest one become critical of these high minded ideals, both stalinists and walshist economists have a

scientific theory which proves everything. Because the theory is scientific and rational, it (and by extension those who hold it) speak for the common good. The pronouncements of the stalinists or of Max Walsh are by definition statements of what is in the best interests of everybody. If you disagree with this rational statement, then you must logically be speaking on behalf of some special interest. Special interests are the enemy of communists, champions of universal consuming and producing man. Spokespeople for special interests will be silenced. Great progress has been made in this department. It is no longer necessary to haul people off to prison or the rustic concentration camp for opposing the economists, although there are places in the world where this is still necessary for the good of all.

Throughout the Cold War, one was offered this limited range of ideological goods: one chose either to be tyrannised by bureaucrats or exploited by the bosses. In having so little choice of ideologies available, the cold war itself was a kind of ideological war communism. This restricted range on offer in the ideological deli is still the state of things at the *Sydney Morning Herald*. If you are not in favour of deregulation and privatisation then you must be in favour of bureaucratic sclerosis and stagnation. Glasnost, it would appear, has not happened at

the *Herald*. The Cold War is still alive and well, pitting one version of the same ideology against another.

Both walshists and stalinists want to abolish politics. Politics, and the civil society in which matters politic are discussed and bargained, is about special interests, the formation of some kind of hegemonic compromise between this group and that. Communists of both the market and plan variety are opposed to all that. In place of all this would go the pure rationality of the plan or the market. The only real ideological difference is that a plan must have authors.

The market, on the other hand, is a kind of plan without an author. Like god, it works divinely, sight unseen. Very postmodern, this — market communism is plan communism that has gone through that phase known in French theory as the death of the author. Apart from that it remains untouched. Politics, in a democratic society, is a mechanism through which people might wrest a bit of power from the state and capital. So it is politics, above all else — politics in the best and most useful sense of the term — that Cold War communism of both the Eastern and Western style were hotly against.

The flaw in the symmetry of this argument is obvious: Eastern communism falls to bits while Western

walshism thrives - even in the East. The remarkable thing is just how quickly the apparatchiks were able to swap Stalin for von Hayek, market for plan, capital for state. If anyone wanted a demonstration of the close affinity between Eastern communism and the market ideology of the West, this is it. Far from being a triumph of free, rational, inevitable economics, it is rather more a swapping of one hoary old cold war communist rhetoric for another. The Soviet magazines still impose a censorship almost as strong as in the old days. Only these days it is von Hayek who gets in print, all that plan stuff is out. As one might say in Eastern Europe now: "meet the new boss, same as the old boss".

At least they can have some fun there with a new ideology. At the *Herald* we're stuck with the tyranny of the old one. One only wishes the Cold War would end at the *Herald* so we could have some real discussion, realistic but not 'scientific', pluralist and frank about the real problems of interests, power, production, not to mention some visions of the good life as more than just more washing machines. It is one of life's small ironies that such a discussion might take place in *Australian Left Review*, and not at the *Herald*, where Cold Power communism reigns supreme.

McKenzie Wark.

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