Interview with Ernst Fischer

Spiegel: Mr. Fischer, last year we asked you about the hopes of a human socialism, about the danger that in Czechoslovakia the experiment of a reconciliation between democracy and communism could be ended by violence. You told us: The traces of what occurred till now will never disappear. On the next day, foreign troops invaded Czechoslovakia.

Fischer: I am still firmly convinced. The traces will not disappear. Something extraordinary occurred at that time, which goes well beyond everyday politics: for the first time in history a people was happy for eight months. Whomever I spoke to in Czechoslovakia — whether worker or intellectual — there was simply the light of happiness which rose from the whole people. At last, what we thought, at last, what we dreamt!

It was a short intoxication, perhaps like in Russia after the February revolution of 1917 until the dispersal of the Constituent Assembly and of the supporters of the Soviets in Kronstadt by the Bolsheviks.

I believe that Czechoslovakia, in the few months before August 21, was the freest country that ever existed. But the memories of this happiness cannot disappear. Some will despair, many will resign themselves. A few have become scoundrels. But the memory of the days of the Prague spring remains a powder keg, with which the authorities cannot cope. This powder keg will blow up one day.

Ernst Fischer was born in 1899. He joined the Communist Party of Austria in 1934, and in 1945 became minister for Education in the Provisional Government. He was expelled from the Communist Party after the invasion of Czechoslovakia. He is author of The Necessity of Art: a Marxist Approach and other books. This interview appeared in Der Spiegel in November 1969. Translation by Henry Zimmermann.
It appears that this powder keg has barely touched other communists, not even the communist parties in the West.

The very mighty offensive of the Moscow power apparatus, and of all the power apparatuses loyal and subservient to it, has increased. For progressive communists, for those who are democratic-revolutionaries, the situation has become more difficult. But in the Italian party for example, something similar occurred as in Austria. A group has issued a journal: *Il Manifesto* — outside the party, against the line of the party, against the strategic line of the party.

The rebels have not yet been expelled from the Party, as you were from the CP of Austria?*

At a broad discussion in the Italian Central Committee it was stated that such things could not be tolerated, but there was no sanction, no administrative measure, the result was: "We have to continue to discuss". And at this meeting my friend Lucio Lombardo-Radice warned: "Beware of the Austrian methods. When one starts to expel an Ernst Fischer, and to silence a Franz Marek, then the whole party is endangered". I recount this one event to show that there is much explosive material in the parties.

But aren't all the supporters of the Prague model being eliminated step by step from the Communist Parties of the West?

We Communists who are not prepared to submit, who are not prepared to recognise a sanction, who have our own brains and do not think with the brains of others — we have suffered a defeat. But it is one of those defeats about which Rosa Luxembourg once said that they could be more important for the future than some temporary victories. The temporary victors are the tanks, the Soviet power apparatus, which has no interest in the existence of living communist parties, but only the deepest contempt for them.

The party apparatus then represents anti-Communism?

Nothing is feared more today by the Moscow power apparatus than an autonomous revolutionary-democratic movement. This started already under Stalin: the great power policy, this great

*They have been since — trans.
Russian chauvinism, of which Lenin once said, it was “a scoundrel and a despot”. They talk a lot about our break with Moscow. In reality it is the other way around. The present Moscow power apparatus has broken with the idea of socialism. Brezhnev—that is the break with Marx and Lenin.

You are a marxist . . . and the Russians they are not marxists?

We are watching with concern how the terrible heritage of Tsarism is gradually stifling the legacy of the October Revolution in the Soviet Union. The decisive impulses in the near future will not come from the Soviet Union, not from the Eastern bloc, but most probably from the West.

From the communist parties of the West?

Perhaps also from individual social democratic parties, also from formations which are only just arising and which we cannot yet clearly recognise and define. In my party, the Communist Party of Austria, the intellectuals, the majority of the shop stewards, particularly the younger shop stewards, stand on the side of the progressive communists.

The communist parties of the West have to participate in elections. Then the official line of the party counts. The course taken against the traces of the Prague spring will express itself in the political arena in defeat for the communist parties.

The comrades in Sweden have lost an election, here in Austria we have lost an election. But that is not decisive. I am not thinking of today’s voter. I am thinking of the voter, the people of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. The decisive thing is that a new spirit of revolutionary democracy is beginning to break through—gradually, in a contradictory way, within the communist parties and far beyond the communist parties.

If the communists as a party cannot win an election, which road to power do you wish to take if no Soviet tanks can help you?

What interests me is the response to the events in this tiny Austrian party in the left Catholic circles, among social democrats,
among intellectuals and young workers in the factories. For the first time, the whole of the youth organisation does not stand behind the party! Here we see what I consider the possibility of tomorrow, that is, a community of struggle which is no longer a party of the old style, but a new community reaching right across all the archaic fronts.

That means: party communism is dead.

Most of the communist parties — as in general all political parties — have remained far behind developments. The decisive contradiction of modern society is, in my opinion, between the possibilities and the requirements of our epoch on the one hand and a completely archaic social structure on the other hand: archaic institutions, archaic parties, archaic thinking — between the unused possibilities which modern science and technology offer us and the factual situation in the world. Immense sums are being wasted for armaments, the earth is left in a miserable condition, a condition of ignorance, of wastefulness, of contradictions — and one flies to the moon. I believe that this contradiction of the waste of productive forces, of the squandering, of the misuse of all that modern science, technique and labor creates, will increasingly become a social force. And this is where I see the decisive contradiction, not just in proletariat and bourgeoisie.

The proletariat has until now been seen as the social force which alone is interested in solving the contradiction described by you. Who will do this now according to your conception?

This contradiction, or rather the possibility of revolt is expressed particularly in the youth. The student movement — which has had its successes but also failures — is a revealing symptom of this epoch. This is not simply as before young against old, but this is a revolt of the growing generation against the whole archaic environment, the outlived institutions and courts which surround them.

The communist parties have not been able to establish a genuine relationship to the revolution of the youth.

Nor to the second revolutionary force: the alliance of science and the labor movement, which is slowly emerging. It is exciting to observe how very many of the leading scientists are beginning to
realise that science is not above moral values but embraces responsibility. And thirdly: the working class of today is no longer the proletariat of yesterday as Marx knew it. Today it is a class in which gradually the border-lines between the skilled worker, the technician, the engineer are beginning to become blurred. The number of white collar workers is growing. Soon in the highly developed countries we shall see more white collar workers than blue collar workers.

Will the white collar workers change society then?

Knowledge is outraged more strongly by the social environment than lack of knowledge. The highly skilled worker is decisive. I believe that intelligence is one of the deciding factors of every revolutionary movement, one of the deciding forces of production, as fantasy for instance is another productive force.

These theses mean that you are no longer a dogmatic marxist, Mr. Fischer. What should the organisation of the revolutionary forces be like? Do you believe that some kind of new party will arise?

We are fed up with the old existing parties. I expect that completely different social formations will gradually emerge—full of contradictions, without recipes, at first bespecked with many errors. They can't be constructed in your head. They arise from practice, which must be continually thought through, always be tested and transformed into theoretical conclusions.

Can you already state some examples or is that at present just a hope?

There are already new international contacts between progressive people and groups of very different trends.

What kind of people are they?

My friends and I for instance find it much easier to talk to a progressive young Jesuit or Dominican than with a dogmatic communist. Old barriers to an understanding have largely been lowered, the old vocabulary is gradually beginning to disappear.
Mr. Fischer, are you still a Leninist?

I am a marxist. I believe Lenin was the greatest revolutionary of our epoch. But I have the greatest horror for the term marxist-leninist, this theological concept which is in reality only a transliteration for Stalinism.

Your hope that the intellectuals might be the decisive revolutionary force recalls the old elite theory of Lenin, and this lies even today at the base of the dogma of party communism.

It is not very likely that a social perception and new methods of social change will come from any of the existing parties. I can imagine it in Italy — the Communist Party of Italy has really basically understood the new contradictions of modern society and recognised that new methods are needed; that new perceptions are demanded, that new alliances must be forged.

So you are still prepared to gamble on that party?

Also on the Spanish Party and many others.

But what do you expect of the masses?

I see for instance at high schools and universities the growing consciousness of the students, the victims I would say of these outdated institutions. These victims say: This can't go on! For different reasons, scientists will say: This can't go on! And again for totally different reasons even larger numbers of workers will say: This can't go on! I mean the growing feeling of malaise, of uneasiness, of the feeling that we have affluence, but behind this there lies a terrible inner distress, and this distress cries out from the schools, and cries out from art, from publications and from many manifestos. The growing feeling of distress will increasingly penetrate, grow through and finally burst through the feeling of affluence. We are living in the midst of the world revolution — completely different to the way Marx and Lenin thought of it. The only reasonable and necessary goal is socialism.

There are more signs of this disquiet in Western countries than for instance in the Soviet Union or the GDR. One could conclude from this that the West is closer to the socialism, as you imagine it,
than the totally stagnant (even in the development of productive forces) socialist world, long overshadowed by the West.

The growing disquiet actually proves the opposite.

But only if the conflicts in the socialist countries have been resolved.

The precondition for the Prague spring at any rate was socialised industry. A powerful enemy was missing — capital which is interested in the maintenance of its profits. Thus it was easier in Czechoslovakia than in a capitalist country to carry out a peaceful democratic revolution. In a capitalist country this would have been impossible.

What do you mean by "socialised industry"? Who has the power of decision over the means of production in this "socialised industry"? Surely not society — the working people, the population?

One of the opponents of revolutionary reforms, of a new structure of society is the search for profits by the capitalists — which I am not now posing as an individual devilish characteristic, but the capitalist must be hungry for profits, he really has no alternative; either he goes broke or he must continually increase production, the rate of profit. This enemy is missing however in a country with a socialised industry. In the socialist, let us say in the so-called socialist countries, enough enemies remain: the shocking bureaucracy.

But these enemies are much more powerful than private industrialists. In a state owned industry, the state is also the employer — a master who owns the whole state apparatus directly.

I don't believe that the state as employer is more dangerous than the individual capitalist or the capitalist monopoly.

You can strike against individual capitalists, you can't strike against the state.

In Czechoslovakia, the nationalisation of enterprises has in no way hindered the workers from striking and organising their struggle. On the contrary at a certain turning point it made the struggle easier. But I am not asserting that the present condition of nation-
aliased industry in the East creates better conditions for the workers than the capitalist industry in the West.

Surely even worse, for the workers in the capitalist countries possess more political and social rights.

Take the GDR. The conditions of the workers are no worse than in the West, in some respects better than in the West. The workers have an extensive voice in questions of hiring of employees, of the conditions on the job, etc., and are in my experience not at all dissatisfied. It is a fact that the GDR is a highly developed industrial country. Economically things are improving in the GDR.

But surely that is no argument proving social progress.

No, that's true. If we understand the competition between socialism and capitalism in the way the Soviet leaders for instance interpret it: who has a greater social product? where is the productivity of labor greater? where is more being produced?—then capitalism has won the competition. The competition must be fought out as it was attempted to be fought in Czechoslovakia; the struggle of human happiness against human unhappiness, the competition: where is there more freedom? where a greater unfolding of all personal abilities? — the contest between the principle of achievement which only thinks in terms of increased production, or at least to think that man, not the product, decides. In this sphere socialism would potentially be the victor. There are however no historical examples yet.

So you now develop the force of production, fantasy, which you postulated, in the direction of a model which does not yet exist.

Yes. I am convinced that such a model would have arisen in Czechoslovakia — associated with great difficulties, therefore not an ideal example.

Are the traces of this Czechoslovak experiment also visible in the communist parties of the socialist countries?

Not in the party apparatuses of the Eastern bloc. But traces of these Czechoslovak events have entered deeply into all these countries and have released something there. I could name from...
my experience and from the circle of my friends many people of
different origins and positions who were deeply influenced by
Prague. They have drawn hope from it that a real socialism is
possible. They have drawn courage to offer resistance under
difficult conditions, to organise a kind of illegal activity. True,
they are only small groups, for instance in Poland.

But these small groups are confronted by big ones, which retire
into complete apathy.

The immediate reaction is great resignation, despair, cynicism,
“what’s the use of it all?” Naturally that is the immediate reaction.
But in the whole historical development small minorities have
always been decisive in the long run, and anticipated the future.

That’s where Lenin appears again.

You could equally say: “That’s where Christ appears again”. He
started with twelve disciples and then it became a world move­
ment.

But among the twelve there was already a traitor.

Among the twelves who are getting together here and there in
the countries of the Eastern bloc there is surely a traitor. But
the one Judas has not prevented Christianity from becoming a
world movement. And the many Judases, the many scoundrels
in the countries of the Eastern bloc, will not be able to prevent
it either in the long run.

Christianity hardly changed the social relations in this world
but rather stabilised them. Today it appears that communism
too is unable to change the social relations in this world.

First I would like to defend Christianity. It is true it brought
forth no social revolutions, but nevertheless it carried some great
new ideas into a rather brutal egotistical world — ideas which have
not become socially dominant, but yet built among a not too small
section of mankind new moral barriers, an ethical code, which did
not exist previously. You see, communism, which has had far
less time so far, and which has had the misfortune to win first
in a backward country, this communism has nevertheless changed some things. It has forced the capitalist world to grant more reforms than it would otherwise have done. The beneficiaries of the Russian Revolution are not so much the Russians, but rather the whole Western working people and the peoples of the “third world”.

But communism has also, because of its terrorist appearance in Russia, robbed socialism of many possibilities in Western Europe.

Since the Prague spring we know that it can be different, such a regime can be smashed. A socialism with a human face is possible. I repeat, these are the traces which will never disappear in the consciousness of millions of people. I do not expect that new impulses will come from countries of the East. This is now rather the responsibility, the moral and historical duty not only of the communists of the West, but of all those in the West who feel and think as socialists in the broadest sense of that word. The people in the Eastern bloc are waiting for us. I am a very unimportant man from a small party in a small country. Yet I hope that our voice will be heard.

The Soviet Union today is no longer an under-developed country, but an industrial state with the largest proletariat in Europe. Is it imaginable that this proletariat — using the productive force, fantasy — will one day arise and realise a new world?—That the events of Czechoslovakia will be repeated in the Soviet Union?

It was no accident that this thing started in Czechoslovakia because it is the industrially most developed country in the Eastern bloc, and also because the Czechs have a great democratic tradition. The history and tradition of a people play a decisive role also on the road to socialism. This is often underestimated by the vulgar marxists. In Russia today beneath the new social relations of production, the old tsarist Russia continues to live — this horrible tradition of a country which knew no renaissance, which had no city bourgeoisie, but 300 years of Tartar rule instead. We in the West have the advantage of a tradition of personal freedom, of the awareness of individuality, of the dignity of man and of the rights of man, which had been little developed in Russia. This whole tradition is becoming virulent and may in the West — we see it today for instance in the churches — become a revolutionary
force. On the other hand I do not exclude the possibility that in the East the idea of socialism, which has degenerated into a phrase, may have a definite influence in the education of youth and lead—and has led in Czechoslovakia—to people saying: "Yes, that's what we are taught in school, but in our country things are not like that".

You mean that the phrase forces people to confront reality? It still acts as a measuring rod?

I see not only in the communist parties of the West very strong potential forces of renewal, but I see these forces also in all the countries of the East. But it will be a more difficult, slower, contradictory process, for there other opposition forces also exist, there is a growing nationalism, movements of religious sects, which are becoming increasingly significant, so that it is impossible to predict when and how these difficult contradictions, these different movements, which oppose the rigidity of the system, will break through.

Do you believe a revolutionary upheaval is possible, or do you believe that as in the West there is a probability of reform also in the East?

In general I would not counterpose reforms and revolution so absolutely. I believe that world revolution is a chain of greater and lesser reforms which are achieved sometimes by violent means, but sometimes also by non-violent means. Soviet technologists and people in the economy are forced to ask more and more frequently: "Why do we remain behind?" They already feel this today. America has overtaken them, they will fall further and further behind. The question then arises: perhaps a little more democracy is needed after all and perhaps we need newspapers which really inform, real discussions to give real incentives for productivity, for collective work, for collective thinking, for collective action. It is also possible that against the Great-Russian nationalism there will be an alliance of another many-sided nationalism with certain technocratic circles. It is also possible that certain sections of the working class will join this alliance and that some time the fall of a dictator, of a politbureau will have greater consequences than hitherto. All this is possible. But all this I would not like to prophesy in detail.
As against this vision there is the small opposition which communists offered to the Prague intervention, the slight protest against the only States in Europe to cross borders by force of arms since the second world war — the five Warsaw Pact States.

This has been partially due to the great influence of the respect felt for the Soviet Union as the first communist state of the world, the country of Lenin and the October Revolution. I know from personal experience how difficult it is to overcome such a deep, such a strong feeling of attachment, which we had for the Soviet Union. This attachment to the Soviet people, which defeated German fascism, I retain as before. But it is not easy to recognise and correct deep, great, decisive errors, because this is not just an intellectual process, but it is also linked very much with feelings. I have complete understanding for old workers, for old communists, who are simply unable to learn anew. That was their life, that was the content, the meaning of their life.

Surely one could expect from people who claimed to aim to liberate the world, to recognise, however painful it might be, that they have served a criminal cause.

I would never make any reproach to these honest, if dogmatic and inflexible, communists. My reproach is directed at the cynical apparatus, which tells lies, which is never moved by emotions, but only wishes to hold on to its position. I hope that with the whole of the younger generation these emotional feelings will no longer play any part. It is no accident that the youth stand united against this dogmatic line, for to them the Soviet Union does not in any way mean what she meant to us — and I admit still means to us in the deeper recesses of our hearts.

But the apparatus had already lied, been cynical and terroristic in the past.

That is not correct.

Don't you have the feeling that for half of your life you have been linked with the wrong people?

No, I don't have that feeling. You see the great difference between the present situation and the time of the trials and purges
of the thirties is this: We — I include myself — really believed that it was like that, that there was really a conspiracy against Stalin, that the confessions were genuine. We believed that and millions believed that.

And today it's different?

If Brezhnev says anything, nobody believes a word of it and those who repeat it consciously lie, and those who listen to it know it's a lie. That is the great difference of the repetition — the first time it is effective, one is prepared and able to co-operate faithfully in the most horrible things. The second time it doesn't work.

Do you really believe that this faith existed throughout the 'thirties, when everyone in the Soviet Union lived among people, who suddenly disappeared the next day, when everyone knew perfectly well that they were honest, convinced communists?

I lived in Moscow at that time. I only had one thought. Hitler must be beaten, and only the Soviet Union can beat Hitler. Everything else was secondary. If I knew then what I know now, I would have conducted the struggle against Hitler in the same way or perhaps committed suicide. There was no other alternative.

Even at the time of Stalin's break with Tito you saw no alternative.

I shall never forgive myself the position I took then against Tito. But I — like many others — thought: We are confronting a third world war. There can be nothing between the fronts.

But today you stand between the fronts — or to which camp do you belong?

I am no returning prodigal son. I left my father's house and I am moving even further away. I am returning neither to social democracy, nor to the world of my father, but I go on as a communist into the unknown.

Mr. Fischer, we thank you for this conversation.