The Death of Communism

The post-war world has collapsed and, with it, the ideological trenches between East and West. US State Department official Francis Fukuyama, in an influential article, has even suggested that it marks the "end of history", with liberal capitalism outlasting its rivals from Left and far Right. Is the socialist tradition beyond recovery? Or is it the whole political firmament which is in flux? P.P. McGuinness and Brian Aarons debate.

The Grand March Routed

Padraic P. McGuinness argues that the death of traditional socialism also puts pressure on the Right to take an interest in the problems of capitalism.

The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and the maintenance of communist regimes in other countries only by means of force and repression not only signal the end of communism but also the end of socialism as it is currently generally understood.

It has to be remembered that socialism arose as a response to the early stages of capitalism, both as a romantic rejection of the insecurities and disruptions of capitalism, along with its blatant poverty (though it has to be remembered that the poverty of feudal times was much worse), and as a Utopian alternative. Socialism was a phenomenon of early capitalism; and as capitalism has been civilised and liberal democracy and the rule of law have, however imperfectly, asserted their sway, socialism as a creed has become increasingly irrelevant.

As a set of values it need not have become irrelevant. For originally the values of socialism were the same as those...
of liberal democracy, in both ethical and political terms - liberty, equality, etc. The error began to creep in when it was postulated that in no meaningful way could these values ever be achieved while private property and inequalities of income and wealth persisted, and that therefore capitalism was incompatible with the values of socialism. But Utopia rapidly gave way to Dystopia, and the evidence of all the bloody social experiments of this century is that the original values of socialism are incompatible with the means, including the abolition of capitalism, proposed to realise these.

Here is where socialists betrayed their original values. They could have reappraised the means to their realisation (which, as Camus, for example, pointed out in The Myth of Sisyphus, can never be more than ideals towards which to strive, always failing and always persisting). Instead, they allowed obsession with slogans, with misconceptions, with features of capitalism which were no more imperfect than those of socialism in practice but which did not require oppression and interference with individual liberty for their existence, and with power to replace the original values. Socialism as a kind of ideal construct became the end, not the means - and either the malpractices of those countries calling themselves socialist were denied, or they were dismissed as irrelevant to the end of socialism.

Ideology came in here - not in the phoney marxist sense, by which all other people’s beliefs except one’s own are dismissed as ideology, but in the sense of banners behind which to march. There developed, especially among the educated middle class, a desire to join what Milan Kundera calls the Grand March. He writes, in The Unbearable Lightness of Being:

When the crimes of the country called the Soviet Union became too scandalous, a leftist had two choices: either to spit on his former life and stop marching or (more or less sheepishly) to reclassify the Soviet Union as an obstacle to the Grand March and march on.

Have I not said that what makes a leftist a leftist is the kitsch of the Grand March? The identity of kitsch comes not from a political strategy but from images, metaphor and vocabulary. It is therefore possible to break the habit and march against the interests of a communist country. It is possible to threaten the Vietnamese army with one’s fist. It is impossible to shout ‘Down with Communism!’ ‘Down with Communism!’ is a slogan belonging to the enemies of the Grand March, and anyone worried about losing face must remain faithful to the purity of his own kitsch.

There has been much debate concerning the end of history, as proposed in a now-famous article by Francis Fukuyama in the US journal The National Interest. This is
really no more than a fairly superficial revival of the ideas of Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, in which history is the story of the struggle of the Mind towards freedom. Hegel himself identified this with the ideas of the French Revolution - that is, with the basic notions of liberal democracy. The end of history comes when the other contenders for the human mind, authoritarianism, oriental despotism and, as it turned out, socialism, are finally abandoned in its favour. This is of course the end of history only in a very special sense and, as Marx pointed out when he described all previous history as the history of class struggles, the end of this kind of history is really the beginning of fully human history.

So what we are really talking about is not the end of history but the end of socialism. The socialists instead of recognising this are loath to abandon the Grand March, so are casting about for new or refurbished causes for the banners behind which they march.

There have been a series of such causes - the anti-Vietnam War movement, the anti-Apartheid movement, the anti-nuclear weapons movement, the anti-nuclear power movement, the Nuclear Winter scare and, most recently, the environmentalist movement. None of these has been without merit, but there have been many attempts to incorporate them into the Grand March rather than treat them on their merits.

As with economic issues, there has been a confusion of ends with means, and a refusal on the part of the exponents of leftist kitsch to distinguish between the banners and the actual values which socialism once espoused. To me it appears clear enough that if one is genuinely committed to environmental issues, for example, it is both stupid and dangerous to rule out from the very beginning analytical approaches or policy measures which might help to tackle the problems, just because there are not in accord with the kitsch.

There are socialists who do attempt to move from kitsch to real issues. One such in the field of economics is Alec Nove, whose book *The Economics of Feasible Socialism* is a serious treatment of the issues of economic efficiency, the operation of markets, and so on. He is a socialist in that he feels that certain industries and problems require a governmental rather than an individual capital or entrepreneurial approach. In this he may be right - it really is a matter for careful consideration rather than doctrinal presumptions. But at the same time he recognises that market mechanisms are a necessary constraint on the authoritarian tendencies of socialism, as well as the evolution of privilege (what economists refer to as 'rent-seeking' - the use of monopoly or licences as a source of income at the expense of the rest of the community).

Thus, to someone like Nove, it may appear desirable that, for example, Telecom in Australia should be owned by the government (not at all, by the way, the same as collective ownership). But there remains the problem of ensuring that Telecom operates efficiently, without waste of resources and so as not to delay the introduction and dissemination of new technology; and the problem of ensuring that the management and employees of Telecom do not act in such a way as to extract monopoly rents from the rest of the community as they do at present. The best solution to these problems so far appears to be free entry for competitors, and a regulatory authority which enforces competition law rather than its own judgments as to what is good or desirable.

Given this, the question of whether Telecom remains in state ownership or not ceases to be terribly important. There may well be, as Nove would argue for both Telecom and railways, a case for state ownership as the most effective way of ensuring the proper use of networks and joint production facilities. But there is not a case for enforcing state monopoly.

But for adherents of the Grand March this kind of thinking is totally unacceptable since it means that one of the banners they like to march behind ceases to become a banner. And they would rather their kitsch than any genuine analysis of social benefit. However, throughout the world the Grand March is faltering.

"...now, when it is clear that the Cold War is over, the Right is going through a crisis of identity just like the Left."

In Europe, socialism, except among tiny groups of mainly middle-class intellectuals, has been replaced by social democracy, in the sense of the management in the public interest of a market economy in which the public sector does not play a dominating role. This is not especially different from liberalism, which does not require 'laissez-faire capitalism', but rather an economy in which the rule of law takes precedence over arbitrary interventionism, handing out of licences, and monopoly. The enforcement of pro-competition law is thus not so much regulation as the insistence that business, unions, and other economic institutions play fair.
The European social charter, which is causing so much pain to Mrs Thatcher, is a social-democratic document which makes sense on the Continent mainly because those countries have never had to deal with the worst excesses of unionism, especially public sector unionism, on British lines. In most respects it is perfectly compatible with competitive liberal democratic regimes, and represents the kind of advance which both sides of Continental politics are now largely agreed upon.

With the end of communist history and the triumph of social democracy both Left and Right are in intellectual crisis. For many years, since the Russian Revolution, clear-sighted intellectuals of various political loyalties have seen the dangers of communist dictatorship (Rosa Luxemburg was one). Many of those on the Right have used this to argue that not only is socialism and communism unlikely to lead to an acceptable political system but also to argue that authoritarian regimes of almost any other kind ought to be tolerated.

In the aftermath of World War Two and the development of the Cold War anti-communism became an obsession and, in the hands of the stupid and evil Right, justified virtually any abuse or crime committed in the name of anti-communism. In this context, it has to be remembered that, despite years of allegations by the Left about the origins of the Cold War, the USSR has officially admitted that it was indeed begun and continued by Stalin. The glaring evils of communism were such that quite a few relatively civilised people on the Right allowed themselves to believe that guarding against the 'present danger' was their most important priority. They may well have been correct.

But now, when it is clear that the Cold War is over, the Right is going through a crisis of identity just like the Left. Some, like Norman Podhoretz in the US, have declared that now they will withdraw from political activity and return to purely literary and intellectual pursuits. But many others, like the socialists who have abandoned the Grand March, are looking for an alternative. It is no longer enough to argue that 'anything is better than communism', nor can the smug assertions that liberal capitalism is superior to socialism in economic performance, living standards, freedom, etc, cut any more ice. We all know that now. But surely there is plenty wrong with our society which needs improvement?

So the crisis for the Right is that it no longer has an excuse for ignoring - as many on the Right did - the reality of serious social problems. Nor is it able to take comfort in the bipolarity of world politics. So we come back to social democracy, in the sense of a liberal capitalist democracy in which government provides certain guarantees. This is Fukuyama's 'end of history' - it is the end both of socialism and of hardline anti-socialism, when the activities of the state in the polity and the economy will be judged on their technical efficacy, not on ideological grounds.

This does not leave us with either a peaceful or a boring world. Domestically, it does mean that the central issues of politics will still involve controversy and conflict as to the best way to achieve a given end, and as to what are desirable social goals. Internationally, of course, we are still left with a world faced with enormous environmental and economic problems, the apparently insoluble problems of Africa, the soluble but still immense problem of AIDS, widespread poverty, debt, and bad government - and a hangover of a proliferating nuclear arsenal, dictatorships in powerful countries like China and many lesser states, and perhaps most importantly the Islamic world. This has led one acute observer to interpret the Cold War as a momentary historical interlude in the confrontation between Christian Europe (and the New World) and Islam.

There is, of course, also the question of the stability of Eastern Europe, and indeed the survival of the USSR as an empire. Despite Gorbachev's immense efforts, there is no sign that perestroika is delivering or will deliver in the foreseeable future. The truth is that Russia has no historical experience with democracy or market capitalism. The Bolshevik coup d'état and Lenin's refusal to accept the democratic verdict of the people against the Bolsheviki in the elections to the Constituent Assembly of November 12, 1917 ensured that Russia remained a bureaucratic dictatorship. The nomenklatura, the privileged class of the USSR, are the direct descendants of the Tsarist imperial bureaucracy.

These privileged groups are not going to give up their privileges out of altruism or a belief that the whole economy must operate more efficiently. They are hanging on grimly. They may yet effect a counter-coup against Gorbachev and the modernisers. And the army has yet to make its voice heard. For how long will the armed forces tolerate the disintegration of the Russian empire?

One of the features of the Soviet economy which has never been fully understood in the rest of the world until the outpouring of at least uncensored writings by Soviet journalists, economists, historians and others is just how huge and appalling the scale of poverty in the USSR is, nor the fact that the only thing which made socialism in that country work at all was terror. The existence of a huge class of serfs, the 'limitchiks' who, because they lacked residence rights in the places where they worked, had to live in barracks, let their children be brought up in orphanages, and lacked the most elementary rights over their working or home lives, is only now being properly documented in the Soviet journals.

For them, socialism was indeed the road to serfdom. Happily we have reached the end of that road in Eastern Europe at least. But socialism has left that region with one legacy which capitalism in the West has virtually abolished - a large, poverty-stricken and rebellious working class. Already there is muttering in the mines, shipyards and factories of Poland and the USSR against the intellectuals who have led the way to perestroika but who can offer them little or nothing in the way of immediate improvements in their living standards.

The final irony of the death of socialism is that the capitalist countries are going to have to provide comfort and succour to its heirs.

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