

Farewell to the Classic Labour Movement?

A hundred and twenty-five years after Lassalle, and a hundred years after the founding of the Second International, the socialist and labour parties are at a loss as to where they are going. Wherever socialists meet they ask one another gloomily about the future of our movements. I think it is perfectly justified to ask such questions, but—and this should be emphasized—they are not confined to the socialist parties. All the other parties are in the same position.

Who really knows what the future will bring? Who even thinks they know, apart from the Muslim, Christian, Jewish and other irrationalist fanatics whose numbers are again on the increase precisely because blind faith alone appears to be reliable in a world in which all have lost their way. Do they know their future in the United States, where they are haunted by the ghost of economic and political decline? Do they know in Rome, where, despite every effort, the Catholic Church is falling apart? Do they know in Jerusalem, where the dream of the national liberation of Judaism is collapsing under the batons of Israeli soldiers? That they do not know in Moscow, and do not even profess to know, is obvious. But what is happening in the Gorbachev era, developments which had been declared a priori impossible by generations of cold warriors on the basis of theories of totalitarianism, proves that even the intellectuals and ideologues of the cold war have come to the end of their cul-de-sac. And the economists—the theologians of our time, disguised as technical experts—do they know? Evidently they do not. How little talk there is about monetarism these days, considering that even at the beginning of the eighties it still dominated the thinking of Conservative governments. When was the last time even Mrs Thatcher mentioned the names Friedman or Hayek, although it was just ten years ago that they were parading their new Nobel prizes? Do businessmen know? Who really believes that? Certainly we in the socialist movement are only scratching our heads as we face the future, for we appear to be entering a land for which our guidebooks ill equip us. But the others no longer have relevant guidebooks either.

That, of course, is not surprising, even without taking into account the fact that movements born in the last century bring a great deal with them from their period of origin which can only be transposed very indirectly

from the era of Krupp's howitzer to the modern age of laser technology. However, the main point is this: in the thirty years following the Second World War the world was transformed globally, fundamentally, radically, and with such unprecedented speed that all previous analyses, even when they remained quite correct in principle, simply had to be modified and brought up to date in practice. There is no need to demonstrate this in detail. To put it in a single sentence, one might say that, taking the world as a whole, the Middle Ages ended between 1950 and 1970. And I would go further and assert that as far as Europe is concerned, those twenty years saw the end of the modern era too. Let us only consider what happened to the peasantry in those two decades, not only in central and western Europe but also in large parts of the Third World. This unique acceleration of historical development alone would have demanded a fundamental revision of previous interpretations. In my opinion this will present the main problem for historians of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

'Thirty Golden Years'

However, for a generation after 1950, it was possible, or at least tempting, to try to conceive this macro-historical revolution in a linear fashion, or to over-simplify it by, for example, describing it as 'economic-technological growth' or something along those lines. But this epoch of global boom—not only in capitalist economies, but also, in a very different setting, in socialist economies—these 'thirty golden years', as a French commentator has described them, led to a world-wide, long-term economic crisis, which has already lasted at least fifteen years. I do not think we can expect a new long-term era of 'economic Sturm und Drang', as Parvus once called it, before the 1990s. I know of no more optimistic forecast that we could really take seriously.

But it is in this time of crisis (which strangely enough began exactly a hundred years after the onset of the analogous 'great depression' of the Bismarck era) that the internal and external contradictions of the post-war period have moved to the front of the world stage. What has become clear is how frail or untenable old analyses or political remedies are, and how hard it is to replace them with new ones. For example, the de-industrialization of the old industrial economies has clearly emerged for the first time as a possible future for our countries. I mean *not* a shift away from the old industries to technically superior ones, or the transfer of industry from the Ruhr to the Neckar, but the movement of industry away from the West altogether. For the so-called 'new industrial nations' of the Third World are a phenomenon of the current era of crisis. May I merely remind you that at the beginning of the seventies South Korea was still classed as a 'developing country', and her industry was described as follows: 'foodstuffs, textiles, plywood, rubber and steel works under construction'. The real crisis of the left today is not that we do not understand the new world situation as well as the others, but that we do not seem to have much to say on the matter. Capitalism does not need to say much, as long as a sudden collapse of the type which occurred in 1931 is avoided—and, after all, that much has been learned from the thirties. Capitalism can retreat to the logic of the market, for as a millionaire in New York explained to me a few days after the stock exchange crash: 'Sooner or later

the market finds an appropriate level again, so long as we avoid revolution in the meantime.' We, however, are expected to say much more.

The crisis of the old ideas, and the need for new thinking, were imposed on socialists by reality itself and its effect on political praxis. The world has changed and we must change with it. I would almost go so far as to say: we more than anyone else. For as parties and as movements we are very much trapped in history. We became mass movements, very suddenly, a hundred years ago. In 1880 there was no socialist or other workers' party with mass support, with the partial exception of Germany. Twenty-five years later Sombart considered the worldwide rise of such mass parties so natural that he tried to explain why the United States, which had no socialism, was an exception.

I should like to make five points about those new movements, which have by now grown to be very old movements. First, they were formed on the basis of a proletarian class consciousness among manual and wage workers, in spite of the striking heterogeneity—the inner and outer fragmentation—of the workers. One cannot even say that those workers who joined the new parties formed a particularly homogeneous group. Nevertheless, it is clear that for workers at that time, what they had in common far outweighed any differences, with the exception sometimes, but not always, of religious or national differences. Without this consciousness, mass parties whose only programme in practice was their name could never have emerged. Their appeal—'You are workers. You are a class. As such you must join the workers' party'—could not have been heard. What we find today is not that there is no longer any working class, but that class consciousness no longer has this power to unite.

Second, despite the fact that both their theory and practice were tailored specifically to the proletariat, these parties were not purely workers' parties. This is probably not so apparent in the highly proletarian SPD but it can be seen clearly in Scandinavia. Given the level of development of the Finnish economy at the time, only an insignificant proportion of the 47 per cent of Finns who voted for Social Democracy in the free elections of 1916 could have been proletarian. Like other Social Democratic parties, the Finnish party was a people's party built around a proletarian core. Of course, no one disputes that, normally speaking, Social Democratic parties hardly expected to win over more than a minority of voters from other social classes.

Third, the mass organization of the class-conscious proletariat appeared to be bound, organically or logically, to the specific ideology of socialism, and typically a Marxian brand of socialism. Parties organized along class lines but without socialist ideas could be seen either as transitional forms on the road to the socialist labour party or as unimportant peripheral phenomena.

Fourth, the sudden rise of the socialist mass parties reinforced the preconceived view of Marxists that only the industrial proletariat, organized and conscious of itself as a class, could act as the bearer of the future state. For, unlike in Marx's own lifetime, the proletariat appeared everywhere to be on the way to forming the majority of the population. The labour-

intensive growth of the economy typical of the time reinforced the confidence in democracy, whose standard-bearers the socialists became everywhere. The question who was to bring about socialism seemed to answer itself.

Fifth, these movements originally formed purely oppositional forces which only moved into the area of potential or actual government after the First World War—as founders of revolutionary new systems in the case of the Communists, or, in the case of the Social Democrats, as state-sustaining pillars of a reformist capitalism. For the socialist labour movements both alternatives signified a fundamental change from their previous role.

The Breaking of the Cord

It is now clear that all these characteristics were historically determined, especially their convergence in the international phenomenon of the socialist labour movement. I would go even further. All socialist and Communist parties of significance, without exception, emerged before the Second World War and, apart from a very few exceptions—China, Vietnam, or West Bengal, for example—had done so even before the First World War. Since the Second World War, in the dozens of new states in an economically transformed world, no movements comparable to the socialist mass parties have emerged. Even where new proletarian mass movements have appeared and are structurally comparable to those of the early twentieth century, in practice, politically and ideologically, they turn out to be quite different, as in Brazil and Poland. The umbilical cord once connecting the labour movement and social revolution with the ideology of socialism has been cut. The greatest social revolution in the current world crisis is the Iranian revolution. It is easier to explain why the European labour parties originally emerged before 1917—and also, incidentally, their spread to the Third World, which, thanks to the October revolution and the Communist movement, took place principally between the two world wars—than it is to explain the non-emergence of such parties and hegemonies since. One can even observe a decline in some existing parties, which at one time were far from uninfluential, for instance in the Middle East. I mention this set of problems here only because as a historian I have long been puzzled by such questions as why a mass labour movement in Argentina, for example, first became possible not on a socialist but on a Peronist basis. This case simply underlines the fact that our movements, the classic socialist or Communist labour parties, were born in a specific epoch which has now passed.

This patently does not mean that these movements have now ceased to be viable within their original heartlands. Quite the reverse. Such parties are still what they were in the past, workers' parties, but not exclusively so. In the non-socialist part of Europe they form either the governing or the chief opposition parties in *all* states except—if I am not mistaken—for Ireland and Turkey. In socialist Europe they are the parties which constitute the system, but this is not comparable. In the course of the past century the socialist labour parties have shown a significant capability for revival and adaptation, though probably more in their Social Democratic than in their Communist form. Again and again they have risen from the

ashes of their ruined or destroyed predecessors to become politically important centres of power, like the SPD in Germany after fascism or, in the last decade or so, the PSOE in Spain or the French Socialist Party under Mitterrand. The question 'farewell to the classic labour movement?' does not mean 'is there a future for the SPD or the Labour Party?', but rather 'what kind of future do they have?' However, we must not forget that we can no longer simply *rely* on historical continuity. Other movements are not obliged to meet the same fate as the PCF, which recently seemed to be disappearing as an effective mass party: even the gods are powerless in the face of political stupidity. But this case does prove how conditional the loyalty of members is these days.

Of the five original characteristics of the movement outlined above, only two still apply fully: the classical party is still a party of the people, and it is still a potential governing party. The old assumption that the transition to socialism would ensue from the development of the industrial proletariat is no longer tenable. The connection between party, socialist ideology and a vision of the future still seems to be alive, thank goodness, despite the fact that from the 1950s onwards all party leaders, even those of some western Communist parties, have waved socialism goodbye, and, if they continue to speak of it at all, have tried to make it appear that socialism simply means having a bit more sympathy than the others. Nevertheless, if there is still a place in Western politics for socialists today, then it is within the old mass parties, despite the agreement among leftwing sects that these parties now do nothing more than shore up the system. Moreover, in contrast to the United States, where almost all American socialists have no choice but to work within the Democratic Party, in Europe the classic parties remain true, at least theoretically, to the idea of a better and transformed society. This, however, reflects the fortunate strength of our historical tradition rather than the necessary connection between the existing parties of this tradition, the working class and socialism.

Class Consciousness

It is class consciousness, the condition on which our parties were originally built, that is facing the most serious crisis. The problem is not so much objective de-proletarianization which has been brought about by the decline of old-style industrial labour, but is rather the subjective decline of class solidarity. This segmentation of the working class has received a good deal of attention recently, but I would like to mention only the case of the British Labour Party, where the traditional proletarian vote has fallen far more sharply than the size of the proletariat. In 1987 almost two-thirds of skilled workers, 60 per cent of trade union members, and more than half the unskilled and semi-skilled workers voted for other parties, and the Labour Party mustered the support of barely more than half of the unemployed. Conversely, almost 50 per cent of Conservative voters were workers. A similar shift can be detected in the support for the PCF. Yet once both parties could rely upon the blind class loyalty of their proletariat.

There is no point in simply mourning this lost class consciousness (although as an old Marxist I still do) nor in retreating into the few remaining nature reserves where the good old proletariat can still be

observed. The great and heroic British miners' strike evoked a great deal of honest romanticism, but there is a difference between 200,000 pit-workers and a country of 55 million. What is more, half of the pitworkers have disappeared since 1985 anyway. And as for the argument of the romantic left—the strike proved the exact opposite assumptions to be true: even among miners one must expect mass strike-breaking today. It is comforting, of course, that class consciousness is also crumbling in other classes. In 1987, for example, 40 per cent of the upper classes in Britain voted against Mrs Thatcher, and among the university-educated classes this figure was as high as two-thirds. But the possibility of new political combinations does not compensate for the fact that workers are crumbling into groups with diverging and contradictory interests.

And yet, in the face of all this, the fact remains that the parties which emerged historically as the defenders and representatives of workers and the poor cannot lose this function as long as such defence is necessary. And this is the case, for today there is no longer any 'common recognition of social principles'—at least not in Great Britain. Fortunately, too, our parties are not *purely* workers' parties and never were; they have lost neither the capability of forming broad people's parties or coalitions of classes and social groups, nor the potential to become ruling parties of government. Today it is not class consciousness which holds our parties together, but the national existence of these parties which unites groups and classes which would otherwise probably crumble.

And this is no small thing. Our movement, the whole of democracy, is once again under threat. We have become so used to the redemocratization—or rather the liberalization—of the bourgeois system since 1945, and the fact that such words as fascism and neo-fascism have been fully emptied of their content, that it is now difficult to remember that in periods of crisis, capitalism could again resort to the solution of the political right. In my country the radical right is in power and, thanks to our mistakes, has been given the opportunity to eliminate the labour movement, the Labour Party, and the entire left as a serious factor in politics. This is the quite blatant aim of the regime. It could happen again in your country too. And the only resistance we can raise against this danger is a coalition of all democrats around those mass parties of the left which still exist in Europe. That much, thank goodness, still remains of the classic labour movement.

Translated by Hilary Pilkington