

The Lost Literature of Socialism

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It is still widely assumed that socialism was always thought of as left-wing-collapsing through a technical fault, rather like a jet that looked good on the drawing-board and survived its trials only to crash with a full load. Even its adversaries often imagine it began with nothing but high ideals; and in an era of socialist obituaries like Noel Annan's Our Age (1990) and the revelations of oppression now emerging from the liberation of Eastern Europe, one seldom hears its first intentions seriously questioned. The subtext reads 'We meant well'. Hardly anyone seems ready to admit that if, in the event, socialism favored the rich and the privileged, it may have done it because it meant to do it. Its halo is still in place.

I want to ask here why, in defiance of the evidence, the name of socialism still sounds benevolent, why its Tory and reactionary traditions, explicit as they once were, have been so soundly forgotten, and why there are still parties that preserve the name when the thing itself is widely rejected even by its disciples.

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One reason is that the scriptures of socialism are little read even by specialists, and the evasion has had its costs. People simply do not know what, in its heyday, the idea was about. That heyday, which stretched for a century or so from the 1840s, gave rise to a mountain of prose - Marx and Engels, Ruskin and Morris, Wells and Shaw, Lenin, Stalin and Mao - which is now seen, not without reason, as boring if not actively embarrassing, and lies largely unregarded; any account of socialist racialism, for example, produces blank incredulity or indignation. It seems fair to suspect that socialists do not dare to read the writings of the pioneers; and their opponents, more surprisingly, do not read them either. 'I had no idea Marx went as far as that,' Isaiah Berlin once remarked when I produced evidence for his genocidal ideas, though his excellent little book Karl Marx (1939), critical as it was of its subject, had by then passed through several editions. Socialism had led a charmed life as a word because hardly anyone studies what it once said.

Socialist genocide is only one instance of ignorance. Another is that hardly anyone now knows some early socialists were conservatives and said that they were. The Tory

tradition of socialism is forgotten. That tradition, however, was once plain in its motives and lucid in its arguments. In the world's first industrial zone, which was western Europe, a new commerce of factories, railways and mines had ruthlessly transformed an ancient landscape with dizzying speed, and capitalism (as some were coming to call it) was naturally seen to be radical. Parties called liberal, which advocated free trade and the free market, were rapidly destroying traditional patterns of life, loosening family ties and threatening morality itself. No wonder if Ruskin and Morris, like the Christian Socialists before them, detested the liberal idea of the division of labor which, as they believed, signified a soul-destroying shift from the benevolent village community to the soulless factory bench. Socialism above all meant a horror of the new age: an age of machines and high finance. It was more than conservative. It was reactionary and nostalgic, and in the long march from status to contract it demanded a return to status.

To make the crisis worse, parties called conservative were seen in that age to offer little or no help. By the mid century they were tacitly collaborating with the liberals, at least in Britain, conceding the suffrage, abandoning traditional landed interests, and silently accepting that protection had had its day. As Disraeli and Marx both bitterly complained, they had surrendered. It was a conservative government, after all, that abolished the Corn Laws in 1846; another that introduced the Second Reform Act to extend the suffrage twenty-one years later. Conservative government, Disraeli wrote derisively in Coningsby (1844), means Tory men and Whig measures. With the liberal idea conquering even its traditional enemies, socialism was an anguished protest against that conquering idea. Of course it was anti-radical. As Bertolt Brecht was one day to remark, as a Soviet supporter: 'Communism is not radical: capitalism is radical'; and if people called conservatives would not stand up for ancient values, so the argument went, then people called socialists must.

All that explains the candid Toryism of much socialist writing in Victorian times and since. When John Ruskin wrote his autobiography Praeterita (1885) he was a socialist of some twenty years standing, and Unto This Last (1862) would one day inspire Gandhi, who translated it. This is how he began his autobiography:

I am, and my father was before me, a violent Tory of the old school
- Walter Scott's school, that is to say, and Homer's. I name these
two out of the numberless great Tory writers because they were my
own masters.

The passage had first appeared some years before, in the tenth letter of Fors Clavigera (October 1871); and a little earlier still, in the first letter (January 1871), Ruskin had called himself 'a violent Illiberal' but in no way a conservative, since he wanted to destroy all sorts of newfangled things like the new Houses of Parliament and the new town of Edinburgh. His programme was for a sort of Tory Greenery, 'to keep the fields of England green and her cheeks red,' as he put it engagingly, with little girls curtsying and boys doffing their hats to any dignified person that went by, including professors. Socialism meant hierarchy and Back to Basics. No wonder if both the Bolshevik and Menshevik parties, before the first world war, attracted a strikingly high proportion of gentry: about a fifth of their total number, it has been estimated, compared with a mere 1.7 per cent of the population of the Russian empire - 22 per cent of the Bolsheviks being gentry.¹ Socialism naturally attracted the patrician mind.

Ruskin's remark about Homer and Scott is worth pondering. They were Tory writers, no doubt, for having extolled the antique virtues of feudal and pre-feudal Europe: loyalty, community, physical courage, all threatened by the modern cash-nexus; and Ramsay MacDonald as a young man once revealed, quite independently of Ruskin, that it was a reading of the Waverley novels along with Scottish history that had 'opened out the great world of national life for me and led me into politics'.² Just what Walter Scott himself, that arch-Tory, would have thought of all this socialist admiration can only be guessed at, but the political effects of the Waverley novels were of impressive implications. Bernard Shaw applauded the point. In Ruskin's Politics (1921) he told a lecture-audience of Ruskinians, to their incredulous amusement, that the true heirs of Ruskin (could they but see it) were the Bolsheviks who had recently seized power in Russia; and they only found that hard to believe because Ruskin had called himself a Tory. But

all Socialists are Tory in that sense. The Tory is a man who believes that those who are qualified by nature and training for public work, and who are naturally a minority, have to govern the mass of the people. That is Toryism. That is also Bolshevism. The Russian masses elected a National Assembly: Lenin and the

¹ Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution 1899-1919* (New York, 1990) p. 364.

² *Review of Reviews* 33 (1906) p. 577.

Bolshevists ruthlessly shoved it out of the way, and indeed shot it out of the way as far as it refused to be shoved (p. 31).

In the same year Richard Tawney, in The Acquisitive Society (1921), called for a return to Christian values and traditional morality, and he ended his book with a demand for a revival of religious ideals abandoned and forgotten in the demeaning scuffle for wealth. Socialism meant 'a rule of life, a discipline, a standard and habit of conduct', as he put it: a traditionalist doctrine and a protest against the modern world.

A few years later the Hungarian Marxist George Lukàcs took up the praise of the Waverley novels, though in a manner not clearly indebted to Ruskin or Ramsay MacDonald. The Historical Novel (1962) was written in 1936-7, and it praised Scott as the sort of Tory who could teach socialists something essential: he had been 'among those honest Tories in the England of his time who exonerate nothing in the development of capitalism - who not only see clearly, but also deeply sympathize with, the unending misery of the people which the collapse of old England brings in its wake.' Old England means a land of gentry animated by traditional moral values, and it was the loss of that secure world that socialists mourned, though not without reservations, with its sense of community, maypole-dancing and knowing-your-place. Capitalism, as everyone knows, can make the vulgar uppity, and Ruskin's Unto This Last had been an attack on liberal economists who had seen man as nothing more than 'a covetous machine' without social affections and with no more moral sense than the lower animals, a creature wholly indifferent to tradition and God's laws. Medieval times may have been far from perfect; there was no doubt a 'Rough Side of the Middle Ages', as William Morris called one of the chapters in Socialism (1893), a book he wrote late in life with Belfort Bax. But medieval craft guilds had at least conceded power and status to the work-force and encouraged a love of craftsmanship, and 'bourgeois historians' had been far too ready to praise what they glibly supposed to be 'the escape of modern society from a period of mere rapine and confusion into peace, order and prosperity', or the commercial and industrial society that Macaulay and others had once welcomed. Morris denied that he was a general apologist for the Middle Ages 'except in relation to modern times', which perhaps implies that he saw all human history since the Ancients as a regression. H.M. Hyndman too began his Historical Basis of Socialism in England (1893), in the same year, with an assertion he offered as uncontroversial: that the laboring masses in the fifteenth century had enjoyed 'rough plenty', the late Middle Ages being, by common consent, the "one period when...

men and women who worked with their hands were better off than at any time before or since'; and he called parliamentary government an utter failure that should be replaced at once by state rule. Modern times were the worst of times, and socialists demanded a return.

The return would be to medieval affluence, as they imagined it, and to traditional family values. In The Condition of the Working Classes in England (1845) Engels had expressed horror at the destruction of married life in the industrial north of England, where he lived: it was demoralizing for women to go out to work, he argued, especially when the husband was left unemployed at home 'to look after the children and to do the cleaning and cooking'. Gender-reversal had no charms for the early socialists.

In Manchester alone there were many hundreds of men who were condemned to perform household duties. One may well imagine the righteous indignation of the workers at being virtually turned into eunuchs. Family relationships are reversed (ch. 7),

the husband being deprived of his manhood, Engels argues indignantly, and the wife of her womanly qualities; and he hints darkly at sexual liberties in factories where the employer was rumored to exercise a ius primae noctis over young women: 'his factory is also his harem.' Hyndman was to echo the point half a century later in his Historical Basis, which revealed a lively horror of divorce and prostitution and demanded a return to family life.

That call was a familiar part of the socialist critique of modern life. Louis Blanc, for example, in a passionate little pamphlet called Le Socialisme (1848), a reply to Thiers, saw socialism as a stabilizing force after a disruptive half-century and more of revolutions in France, concluding that the family offered the best model of social perfection, since it illustrated not individualism but solidarity of interest. The repellent radicalism of free enterprise was a common complaint among socialists. Capitalism shocked not because it was old but because it was new. Communism, by contrast, as Karl Kautsky argued in Communism in Central Europe in the Time of the Reformation (1897), dated from 'the childhood of the race'. It is high finance and the stock market that are the upstarts, and his book celebrates pious Christian sects like the Bohemian Brethren of the late Middle Ages and sixteenth-century Anabaptists, who despised private wealth. It was only in the sixteenth century, Kautsky argues, that the modern state arose, and with it a deprived proletariat. After a capitalistic gap of three centuries, socialism was a rebirth: a revival, not an innovation.

Twentieth-century socialists, too, loved the antique, and it was something remarked on by their enemies as well as their friends. Maynard Keynes used to deride Marxists between the world wars as hopelessly old-fashioned theorists, but the veneration of Marx is only a particular instance of a wider tendency to look back. In his late writings on kinship, for example, based on notes that Marx left at his death in 1883, Engels had called for a return to prehistoric communism without private property, an era no longer credited by prehistorians or anthropologists; and the British anthropologist V. Gordon Childe looked for the natural state of man as far back as neolithic times, when agriculture (as he believed) was non-competitive and cooperative. Since Child's death in 1957 Ken Livingstone, the Marxist leader of the Greater London Council in the 1970s, has gone one better. Utopia, he told John Carvel in Citizen Ken (1984), belongs to an age previous even to the neolithic: the palaeolithic 'operating overwhelmingly in a cooperative way'. There seems to have been no natural limit to socialist nostalgia. Modern finance, said Livingstone, is an abomination, and one radically unnatural to man. 'The hunter-gatherer is what humanity is'.

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Whether medieval, neolithic or palaeolithic, socialism was from its origins onwards a hierarchical doctrine, and it venerated aristocracy and leadership. 'My continual aim,' Ruskin wrote in Unto This Last,

has been to show the eternal superiority of some men over others, sometimes even of one man to all others; and to show the advisability of appointing such person or persons to guide, to lead, or on occasion even to compel and subdue, their inferiors according to their own better knowledge and wiser will (para 54).

Those who have wondered why, in practice, socialists can be so snobbish may have their answer here. They were not snobs in spite of being socialist, in all likelihood, but socialists because they were snobs. Capitalism, after all, is radically vulgar - 'In trade, my dear - and it can give spending power to the most dreadful people. An eminent socialist once remarked in a super-market: 'These places make me bate the human race,' The smell

of common humanity repels by doctrine and by instinct. As Ruskin put it, the aim is to show the eternal superiority of some men over others.

Armies, after all, demonstrate that hierarchy can mean effective order through collective discipline. In his autobiography My Eighty Years (1931) Robert Blatchford, the Victorian journalist, tells how he joined the army at the age of twenty, in 1871, and learned the value of collective action,' only to be shocked at the sight of barefoot children in London streets and in the black slums of Manchester. Converted by reading a pamphlet, he realized that socialism was what his army life had encouraged him to believe in:

It meant human brotherhood and cooperation. It meant the collective action of the Army. It meant esprit de corps (p. 37).

It meant patriotism, too, as military service does. 'The kind of Socialism I am advocating here is Collectivism,' he wrote in Britain for the British (1902); since the nation owns the instruments by which it wages war, it should also own the instruments of production, distribution and property to make war on inefficiency and destitution. Ruskin's curtsy and hatdoffing is now a military salute.

The principle of socialist aristocracy was candidly announced by Lenin fifteen years before he seized power, and in What is to Be Done? (1902), a pamphlet written in exile, he put a blunt case for the rule of an intellectual élite. The fate of this highly important work illustrates the incuriosity with which socialist scriptures are often held, since the most scholarly edition in English - the Oxford edition of 1963 by S.V. Utechin - is based on a shortened text issued in St Petersburg in 1907, and makes its own further omissions; to consult the full text in English one would have to turn to a version of the Soviet edition of Lenin's works, published in Moscow in 1961. No doubt Lenin is scarcely more distinguished than Adolf Hitler as a stylist, but his empire was vaster and lasted longer, and the text of Mein Kampf has not been treated as cavalierly as this. Lenin's argument is uncompromising. Since Marxist revolution is based on theory, and only intellectuals can understand theory, only an intellectual élite can lead the revolution: 'the educated representatives of the propertied class, the intelligentsia' (II.A). Marx and Engels, after all, as he justly remarks, were bourgeois intellectuals. So, of course, was Lenin; and so, for the most part, were the great Marxist dictators of Europe and Asia after him, like Mao Tse-Tung. Socialism necessarily means government by a privileged class, as Lenin saw, since only those of privileged education are capable of planning and governing. Shaw

and Wells, too, often derided the notion that ordinary people can be trusted with political choice. Hence the aristocratic superiority of the Bolsheviks, who reminded Bertrand Russell, when he visited Lenin soon after the October Revolution, of the British public-school élite that then governed India. Socialism had to be based on privilege, and knew it, since only privilege educates for the due exercise of centralized power in a planned economy.

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The next step was for the ruling élites of the socialist world to grant themselves the privileges, sometimes even the hereditary privileges, of a ruling caste. Socialism was soon seen to be hereditary in its nature: it conferred unlimited economic power, after all; unlimited economic power means unlimited power, in practice, and rulers who possess it naturally assume privileges for themselves and their own. They do not cease to be human because they made a revolution. The rapidity with which the socialist world formed itself into an ancien régime took some observers by surprise, presumably because they had not Ruskin and Lenin, Shaw and Wells. Stalin's son, who died in a German prisoner-of-war camp, was destined by his father for high office, and knew it; the Rumania of President Ceaus escu had the dictator's wife and son in the cabinet; Erich Honecker of East Germany gave his wife a cabinet post; and the communist leader of North Korea, Kim II Sung, founded a dynasty for his relatives. By the 1950s even some communists were admitting that something like the rule of the Bourbons had been restored to much of Europe and large tracts of Asia as well. In 1957 the Yugoslav dissident Milovan Djilas published The New Class, a book that shattered the illusions of many - not because it said anything that was new, exactly, but because it was said, and for the first time, by a former member of a communist government. Since socialism gives an administrative monopoly to one party. Djilas argued, the party quickly and inevitably turns into a privileged caste. 'The party makes the class,' he wrote, and 'the class grows stronger while the party grows weaker.'

The Communist political bureaucracy uses, enjoys and disposes of
nationalized property (pp. 40, 44),

so that it turns into a Bourbon-style system of high-living magnates like Tito who pay no taxes and live in palaces, their daily existence eased by chauffeured cars, opera boxes and

yachts, not to mention servants and medical care paid for out of the public purse. Socialism readily becomes a system ripe for exploitation by friends and relatives. The example of Sanjay Gandhi, appointed by his mother as head of a state car firm and destined, had he lived, to succeed her as prime minister of India, shows that even in elective systems public ownership and hereditary privilege go hand in hand.

The majestic conclusion to all this lay in the deification of Lenin and Mao after their deaths, when like ancient emperors and Christian worthies they abandoned the dignity of sages or monarchs to become saints or gods. In a tomb in Red Square in Moscow Lenin lay, his body fluids replaced at his death in 1924 by a chemical compound that leaves in doubt whether the object of veneration is Lenin or not, a problem familiar in style to historians of the medieval church.³ Stalin joined him for eight years after 1953, an embalmed corpse. When Mao died in 1976 the example was felt to be challenging, and more than ten thousand people, China Youth News revealed in December 1992, were involved in designing the sarcophagus, the Communist Party holding a national meeting of coffin-makers where six coffins were judged to be fit for the Great Helmsman of the Chinese people, five of them being kept as spares. The glow on his face, as he lies in a crystal sarcophagus in the Mao museum in Peking, is now known to have been achieved by running light-conducting fibers into the sarcophagus, so that the light is reflected on his features, carefully arranged to disguise his wrinkles. This leaves all other instances of saint-worship since the early Christians looking jejune and inadequate.

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It will be asked why, if socialists could declare themselves to be Tory, they were not condemned by radical opinion.

The answer is that they were, though the debate is now forgotten. Shortly after Marx and Engels issued The Communist Manifesto in 1848 a youthful Adolphe Thiers, one day to be President of the French Republic, wrote a pamphlet called Du Communisme (1848) where he concluded that any attempt to abolish private property would destroy incentives to work and create still more poverty; and that by frustrating the hopes of the poor, socialism would in the end kill liberty and strengthen tyranny. At the same time another young Frenchman, Alfred Sudre, published a remarkable book now wholly unread,

³ See Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives: the Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983).

though it went through several editions in its day and was crowned with a prize by the French Academy. Sudre does not even mention Marx or Engels in his Histoire du Communisme (1849), but he traces the history of the idea from Plato through Sir Thomas More to Proudhon, concluding that since Plato's time socialism had always been 'an obstacle to progress' by replacing liberty with the rule of despots; and five years later, in a sequel on sovereignty, he condemned ancient Greek influence on the modern mind for its fatal dedication to a priori reasoning - what Sudre called 'its fierce determination to realize, at whatever cost, the conceptions of arrogant theorizing'. These are radical protests, in the wake of the revolution of 1848, against the predictably conservative effects of socialist theories.

Sudre's conclusion in 1849, in his history of communism, was passionate and eloquent. He had been active for the parliamentary cause in the recent revolution, he explains, in the overthrow of the July monarchy in February 1848, and had written his book as a warning against the socialist agitation that the violent creation of the Second French Republic had just witnessed. Almost nothing, unfortunately, is known about him. A Parisian lawyer, he is said to have been born in 1820, so that he was still in his twenties when he wrote his first book and won his Academy prize; and he argues that attacks on private property have always been reactionary in effects and commonly so divided the land into equal portions and proscribed monied property, left its citizens in brute ignorance their neighbors. Socialism, he wrote, has always been

an obstacle to progress, has slowed its pace and harnessed itself backwards to the chariot of civilization. Humanity has advanced not because of socialism but in spite of it, developing rather by the gradual extension of property and liberty, of equality of rights and legal enactment, by the progressive enhancement and purification of the principles of marriage and the family; by science, literature and the arts.

Communism necessarily means regression. It has

tried to suppress all those elements of progress and in their place set despotism, equality of degradation, promiscuity and ignorance. All the great revolutions have been achieved outside communism:

the abolition of slavery [...] the liberation of the human spirit that mankind owes to the Reformation, to Galileo, Bacon and Descartes; the abolition of feudalism and of inequalities before the law achieved on the night of 4th August (pp. 478 - 9)

when titles and feudal rights were abolished by the French National Assembly in 1789. Sudre was passionately certain that socialism was a reactionary idea. A pity that no known document reveals precisely which parties, groups or individuals he knew or watched in the tumultuous events in Paris in 1848; but his book, still unknown in English but translated into German in 1882 in an extended form, was once famous or at least known, and Lord Acton owned two copies of it in different editions. Since his death, unfortunately, which may have occurred in the 1880s, he has suffered the oblivion that sometimes befalls minds of inconvenient perceptions and embarrassing convictions.

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It is sometimes thought, for all that, that socialism in its day at least bequeathed to Europe and elsewhere the blessings of welfare state.

That is not how it appeared at the time. The welfare enactments of the Liberal government of 1906-14, promoted by Asquith, Lloyd George and Winston Churchill, were an outcome not of socialism but of a New Liberalism to which the small parliamentary group of Labor members, intent only on trade-union reform, had to be persuaded. Nor did William Beveridge, the author of National Health Service in Britain, think kindly of socialism. He often complained to me in his last years of the resistance of Labor leaders during the Second World War to his Report of 1942. 'I joined the Liberal Party,' he once told a public meeting, 'and sat in the Commons as a Liberal, for two reasons: one, that I was and am a Liberal; and two, that the Liberals were the only party that wholeheartedly welcomed my plans for a National Health Service'; and in his memoir Power and Influence (1953) he has left a record of Ernest Bevin's opposition as a Labor leader:

For Ernest Bevin, with his trade-union background of unskilled workers [...] social insurance was less important than bargaining about wages (p. 295),

recalling how Bevin had derided the Beveridge Report as a 'Social Ambulance Scheme' and was furious when back-bench Labor members ignored their leaders and voted for it in February 1943. That capitalism, once rendered humane, might also be rendered harmless, even popular, was a profound and intelligible fear of the socialist mind in the early years of the century. Events have proved it right. When the two Germanies were united in 1990-1, the welfare provision of the capitalist West was discovered to be more than twice as high as that of the socialist East. It is the realization that it takes a free market to sustain public welfare through massive wealth-creation that powerfully contributed to the death of socialism in the last years of the twentieth century.