

# THE OLD AND THE NEW SOCIALISM

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## THE OLD SOCIALISM

The first thing that one realises when writing about the socialism of the past and the socialism of the future is that we are part of a process of in-depth re-thinking of many of the fundamental premises and analyses upon which socialism has been based for more than a century. In 1985 I remarked in the Javea meeting<sup>1</sup> that awareness is beginning to spread that some of the old formulations of socialist thought have become outdated clichés which are no longer useful; nevertheless it requires an effort for us to confront the necessity of renewing these principles – and to acknowledge that some of them no longer are relevant. Today I believe that after the recent events in various communist countries and the new approaches being employed in the theoretical debate, the reticence to engage in this analysis and renewal is beginning to disappear.

After many years, during which it was difficult to voice criticism in various specific regions, or when for reasons of intellectual or political prudence those critical voices were silent, we must now guard against the danger of a complete swing in the opposite direction, resulting in a total rejection of historical socialism and failure to distinguish between the valid and the useless in the theories and experiences of the past. The responsibility of intellectuals on the left of the

political spectrum is to subject our past heritage to a critical review which is as rigorous as possible. In this critique, however, we must avoid irresponsibly overstepping our role and thereby obliterating history or burying the principles on which humanity's hopes of emancipation have rested.

For such reasons, before recalling some of the traditional elements of socialism which have fallen into disuse or those which have proven to be erroneous, we should recognise those thinkers who, from the middle of the eighteenth century, have contributed concepts, ideas and theories which have permitted the development of socialist thought. We should also recognise all those who through their efforts and their activity in support of the cause have participated, in the most diverse corners of the world, in the struggle for a better and more just society. Without them the world as we know it today would be a different place and, unquestionably, worse off. Those of us who have learned to engage in theoretical reflection and to work politically within the framework of cultures which date back thousands of years, know very well that we cannot comprehensively judge our predecessors without taking into consideration the specific circumstances of their era and context. With their errors and limitations, it must be recognised accordingly, that the socialist movement has per-

formed one of the functions which it intended to realise: to transform the world.

In the same way in which we are influenced by the circumstances and possibilities of the era in which we find ourselves, the fathers of socialism were similarly influenced by their era. It was distinguished by the great intellectual constructions of the positivists, by Kant and Hegel, with everything which they share in the sense of all-embracing and all-encompassing will. It is from this that socialism, especially Marxist theory, aspired to be a synthesising, unifying and all-embracing body of thought, and it is from here that this intention was translated in practice into a strong tendency toward simplification and dichotomy. But socialism did not arise only in an era dominated by confidence in the possibilities of constructing a scientifically accurate and definitive body of thought. It was also influenced by other elements derived from Judeo-Christian thought, and the revolutionary spirit of the age, imbued with a 'finalist' vision of history which projected an attitude of 'salvation' into all social and political action. This is the source of the mythification of revolution, of the 'revolutionary movement', as a hope for a complete catharsis from which it was thought that changes resulting in the salvation of humanity would be produced.

In spite of the declared intention of attempting to elaborate a scientific theory (stimulated – in turn – by the great impulses of science and technology), all of these elements were reflected in strong tendencies towards a theological vision of socialism, with its inevitable component of dogmatism, simplification and lack of critical thought. This was very evident in its post-Marxist line, and most extremely in Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism and Maoism. This quasi-religious conception of socialism, which deferred solutions for all evil to a final revolutionary catharsis, impregnated a large part of the debates on the left for many decades. In the realm of democratic socialism, even in the 1950s and 1960s, many radicals did not recognise the real possibility of achieving substantial improvements for workers through reforms conquered in harsh political and social battles. Rather, what was frequently analysed was whether those actions brought us closer to or farther from the great moment of the revolution. Today, when the decade of the 1980s has reached its conclusion, and when we are a mere eight years from the onset of a new century, the theoretical and practical bankruptcy of those mythical revolutions has at least foreclosed many interminable debates.

Such concepts of revolution were accompanied in turn by a bi-polar and unhistorical vision of social conflict. This gave rise to a theory of the sole revolutionary subject, according to which all positive value and all redeeming potential was provided by the proletariat as a permanent, rising, universal social class. Until the moment of the revolutionary breakthrough, this social class was continually impoverished by the dictatorship of the other class which possessed the means of production; an ever more concentrated and exploiting class which exercised domination through the organisation of the state, which was considered, therefore, to be an abominable apparatus of oppression which has to be either eliminated or overcome.

This mechanical and inflexible projection of concepts, some of which were accurate and correct at the specific moment in which they were initially formulated, produced an overwhelmingly strict and rigid body of thought and political practice. Some people were able to correct or adapt it over time, albeit with enormous difficulties, traumas and convolution. Others simply made it even more dogmatic and ritualistic. From different political and organisational concepts of socialism arose an interpretation of the theory of the sole revolutionary subject, with a more or less rigid and more or less permanent vision of the social conflict between classes, and the greater or lesser value given to individual freedoms. From a theoretical point of view it is possible to imagine that if Marx had written after Freud, in an intellectual context influenced by various of the more open and modern scientific concepts, his great capacity for synthesis and assimilation would have been translated into a significantly different theoretical influence over the socialism to come. Setting aside the feeling of loss which this reflection may provoke, it is evident that history neither repeats nor invents itself, and that as part of our era we must adhere to the established facts of history and be capable of learning from them and from the new viewpoints and possibilities of our time.

Historically, to pass from a view of class as the redeeming class to the concept of a 'class party' was a logical step. In this way, some of those who believed in the inevitability of a class party for salvation through revolution immediately inferred the necessity of a vanguard party structure. This, upon achieving power – normally by violent action – and to purify society, used the state and exercised a class dictatorship which in practice, in some countries, became a dictatorship

of the vanguard, or in other words, a party dictatorship. This party dictatorship, owing to its own dynamic and the more generalised influence of the authoritarian culture propagated in the 1930s, became nothing more than a mere dictatorship. This negative sequence of events, denounced and predicted by Rosa Luxemburg in 1917, led to a perfectly obvious result from which only some lucid communists such as Gramsci rightly distanced themselves.

On the other hand, the democratic socialism which originated in the common concept of the class party, to the extent that it assumed free will and democratic procedures (as a form of organisational self-regulation and as a procedure for gaining access to and eventually preserving, power), evolved towards a concept of a broader based party of the masses capable of acquiring majority electoral support for the realisation of progressive political reforms through democratic and peaceful methods and procedures. In some cases, in turn, the concept of a party of the masses evolved towards more generic formulations ('popular party', 'interclass party' and 'the people's party'), with all of the repercussions which this implied in terms of the risks of non-attainment of the socialist project's sociological and political goals.

Nevertheless, what is certain is that, beyond its inadequacies and limitations, the social democratic vision made possible the democratic achievement of power by a large number of European socialist parties. This allowed a test of the possibilities offered by the utilisation of the state for the development of social and redistribution policies. Perhaps some people needed the arrival of the state fiscal crisis of the 1960s and the strong neo-conservative offensive against the welfare state of the 1980s in order to understand the full potential of reform and social change offered by this route. It was a historical error to believe that the state, as a structure, was exclusively an all-powerful and monolithic instrument at the service of a dominant class. It not only showed an insufficient capacity for imagination and analysis, but also reflected the scant development of a sociology of organisations in the period when these simplistic interpretations were made.

Organisations have ends and functions of their own which outstrip the interests of those who prompted their creation, partly because the different groups which use them have their own designs. For this reason the state, which was effectively an instrument at the service of the

bourgeois class, gradually departed from performing this exclusive role in the democracies, thereby converting itself into an insurance agency for society's weakest sectors, an element of balance between regions and an integrating factor for the defence of collective interests. For the same reason, the vanguard party created in order to effect the revolution for the working class ended up by devouring the revolution for its own benefit, as was critically noted by Djilas quite some years ago in his book *The New Class*. Likewise, out of the concept of a closed and static class there arose an ingenuous and evangelical egalitarianism which at times distorted both political discourse and the articulation of complex social and economic demands which can no longer be resolved by a simplistic, uniform, collectivist response.

#### DEMANDS FOR CHANGE AND THE NEW SOCIALISM

Today most people are conscious of the possibility of social change. We live in very dynamic societies which are on the verge of intense and profound transformation. This consciousness of change has become one of the fundamental points of reference for theoretical reflection and political practice. The first thing to be gleaned from a rapid review such as the one which I have just presented – in which many of us are engaged in one place or another – is that theorists and politicians are children of the limitations of the culture and knowledge of their time. Over time, economic, social, technological and political realities are modified and pose new and unexpected issues which require new and hitherto unthought of solutions. Proceeding as cautiously as is necessary, we must probe more deeply into the new realities which have appeared and into the new solutions which we are capable of offering. Accordingly, it is necessary to begin by asking ourselves, with a minimal idea of the future, what can be understood by socialism today.

#### *What socialism?*

The socialism of the future neither starts from zero nor should be treated as *a priori* closed. Socialism is an emancipating ideal innate to the historical process, which influences, and is influenced by, the particular circumstances of specific social events. As I have pointed out, historical

experience protects us against the political risks and theoretical distortions which are fostered by the pretensions of a 'closed system' of ideas which has formulations and forecasts for everything. In our time we know that absolute formulations end up by distorting social mechanisms and prevailing not only over the demands of reality but also over human and societal needs themselves. The socialism of the future must be treated as something which is totally different from a dogma or pseudo-religion; it cannot be a catechism of formulations which must necessarily be believed or disbelieved in a non-rational and non-thinking way.

Socialism is a driving force, an ideal which has been developed and formulated through history on the basis of theoretical reflection and specific experiences. Socialism does not pretend to lay out an *a priori* cliché, a totally finished design of the type of society to which we should aspire. Rather, socialism is the process of developing and relating some emancipatory ideals to specific societies in determinate historical moments. It is in this sense that it can be said that socialism is not a *totus* which can be definitively conquered in a determinate moment as the culmination and conclusion of history, but a basic element of social dynamics. It can be posited within a perspective and approach which aspire to a progressive perfection of human communities, while recognising that this is something which will never be totally achieved.

Hence, in order to progress in the construction of socialism as an emancipatory ideal and as a guide for specific forms of social organisation, we need new approaches through which it will be feasible to overcome given deficiencies, contradictions, alliances, domination, sources of misery and social malaise. It is these which foreclose the possibilities of a given society's free, equal and common progress within a determinate historical perspective. The socialism of the future, therefore, must be constructed on the basis of completely free and unprejudiced debate. It is a task of theoretical-practical elaboration in which very close and direct collaboration between intellectuals and politicians will be necessary. What we need at this moment in order to make progress is not a narrow repertory of *a posteriori* justifications of political practice, nor abstract philosophical reflection unrelated to reality, but rather a theoretical guide for political practice in the coming years.

#### *The horizon of the society of the future*

From the present perspective it is difficult to foresee accurately the manner in which societies

of the future, in all their intricacy, will be structured. However, it is now becoming generally accepted that we are on the verge of very important changes, in all respects, which are going to affect fundamentally basic features of the organisation of our societies. Some social theorists have gone so far as to suggest that the changes awaiting us are more important than those entailed in the transition from the traditional agrarian society to the modern industrial society.

We are still in the initial stages of many of these processes of change, and the new profiles of future society will take some time to appear clearly. However, it is already possible to identify some of the main directions of change. Important changes can be foreseen on a short- and medium-term basis in the nature and the role of employment (which will be less manual, with evolution away from a work-oriented civilisation to a leisure-oriented one); in social classes (with the emergence of new sectors and an accelerated loss of social and economic weight of others); in the power structure (which will be ever more transnational, anonymous and influenced by new cultural and technological elements); in social relations (which will be 'micro' focused and less formalised, and will promote new social identities), on the international map (with a redefinition of political space, and very important diverse economic and political changes which are already in evidence).

Faced with this accumulation of social change and new situations, it is logical to think that the nature of social conflicts in future societies will be significantly different from those which took place during the initial stages of the development of capitalist industrialised society. It is therefore essential for socialism to be able to foresee with sufficient clarity the most prevalent type of conflicts, problems, social and cultural deficiencies, etc., which are going to be produced in the new types of technologically advanced societies that are now emerging.

From a very general point of view the elements of conflict and social breakdown will tend to be very diverse, which is no less than can be expected to occur in very complex societies which are undergoing an intense process of change. Interpersonal inequalities will be accentuated, inequalities with regard to age (youth with fewer opportunities of employment; retired people with scant pensions . . .), sex (persistence of elements of discrimination against women), or culture and education (which give rise to very different social opportunities). National differences in standards

of living – and expectations – are, and will be, extraordinarily unequal between people from different parts of the planet.

The complexity of these new situations demands a vigorous effort toward determining what social demands and necessities are going to be posed in the immediate future. In this sense we must begin with personal demands. What are citizens of these societies of the future basically going to want? A brand of socialism developed without considering the personal demands which citizens of these advanced industrial societies are going to pose – have already posed – will have slight chance of success. For this reason we must be willing to dedicate priority attention to reflection on this question. For the time being, and by greatly simplifying, we can say that the first personal demand will be – as it already is – a standard of well-being, a level of availability of material resources (housing, consumer goods, income, etc.) and a degree of access to education, culture and health care which make up the image of an attainable standard of living for a population at any given moment. This average standard of living constitutes not only a reflection of what in reality is occurring, but is also an 'aspiration', a socially established reference model. It is reflected in public opinion and transmitted by the media. And it can therefore give rise to frustrations and an awareness of limitations among those citizens who do not achieve the standard of a particular historical era.

Accompanying it will be a strong personal demand for security. This will tend to become even more important when minimal subsistence levels are assured, and will acquire special scope in societies experiencing intense change, with all the associated elements of tension and uncertainty. These demands for security will include citizenship rights (such as recognition of individual rights and personal protection), security of status and social recognition (in a perspective of equity and equal treatment and opportunities), employment security (as a social activity and/or as a means of subsistence), security against disasters and illness (such as a guarantee of a healthier existence and higher quality of life) and security against large collective risks (wars, catastrophes, etc.) among which ecological elements will tend to acquire growing importance as a personal demand for healthier environmental living conditions.

Secondly, it is necessary to delve more deeply into the manner in which collective or group demands and needs are going to evolve. This not

only means social classes of an economic nature, as we have traditionally understood them (which struggle to achieve greater social power and participation in benefits), but also new and diverse groups of special economic or social interests which at times are backed by significantly organised economic or institutional pressure groups, corporate organisations, consumers, neighbourhood associations and the like. And, above all, special attention will have to be given to the demands of those sectors which are the least educated and trained and which to a large extent suffer – or may suffer – social isolation, deprivation and subordination, as occurs with many groups which are socially deprived and generally situated outside the logic of the market. Some sociologists have begun to categorise as an 'underclass' those whose social position is basically defined – as are their needs – by cultural and personal factors (level of education, age, sex, etc.).

Thirdly, a socialist perspective of the future cannot overlook the necessities of the social system as a whole, especially in societies in which the free working of the market on classical lines does not in fact guarantee balanced or sustained economic growth, but risks divisions, imbalance and severe social, personal and environmental risks and costs. This is why, in the new societies which are now evolving, the issues of social inequality which result from the difficulty of offering dignified and safe jobs for all, of guaranteeing basic environmental balance and of assuring the availability of sufficient natural resources for future generations, have become fundamental benchmarks for a socialist project for the future. This clearly contrasts with the improvisation and tensions which the neo-conservative perspective introduces into social change under the banner of unrestrained market forces and non-collective ultra-individualism.

Using as a starting point this understanding of the complexity of society and our capacity to offer alternatives which provide integrated responses to the different social demands and necessities, socialism can guarantee the future of a society in which the maximum possibilities of material well-being can be achieved without jeopardising collective environmental balance or fundamental values and human rights.

#### *The socialism of the future*

Naturally, understanding the socialism of the future must be the result of the multiple debates

which are currently underway. We have before us, without doubt, some profound debates which are laden with nuances. It is still too early to foresee the final result while the discussion and reflection remain open. My conviction is that we are going to shape progressively the features of this socialism of the future as demanded by present circumstances, and will gradually establish them in an open manner, dialectically, by engaging in a rigorous and imaginative effort to relate theory to practice. However, the socialism of the future should not be considered by us as the starting point of a new journey, nor as an absolute new reality to be imagined by rendering the past a *tabula rasa*. As I have already emphasised, the socialism of the future is rooted in the long historical course of human and social progress. After all, it is a project which we should approach from the perspective of the achievements of the social and redistributive policies of the past decades.

Once democratic forms of human cooperation have been established in a majority of the Western societies around us, and certain levels of economic growth have been achieved which assure the given minimum standards which are vital for the majority of the population, the basic role of socialism should be oriented towards eliminating all remnants of domination, whether this be economic, political, cultural or ethnic in nature. This means the emancipation of humankind through the following means:

- the furtherance and extension of democratic practices and procedures in the different areas of social life, thereby making possible effective participation of citizens in public life and the progressive improvement of the mechanisms of collective self-government;
- equality and the diffusion of culture and education which embodies the profound meaning of liberty;
- an increase in social time and space which permits personal exercise and enjoyment of one's own creative human capacities, as well as the development of a healthier and more gratifying existence;
- overcoming conditions which produce the social alienation and poverty in which many sectors of the population live;
- creation of the conditions for social balance and harmony which guarantee a progressive qualitative and quantitative improvement of people's standard of living, and similarly assure both dignified social standards for all

people and adequate stability of democratic political systems;

- peace through an international equilibrium, which can both give security and divert resources used from the production of arms towards investments which guarantee our well-being and protection of the environment.

Without doubt, in certain parts of the world there are at present adequate conditions to permit the development of socialism in this direction. But the socialism of the future cannot be treated merely as a formula for progress and welfare for the planet's wealthiest and most privileged nations. Without solidarity one cannot truly speak of socialism. Therefore the socialism of that minority of the world's developed nations must exert itself, in turn, to achieving the evolution of those countries, consistent with the goals which we have just set forth, and at the same time work for the creation of international conditions which permit the development of an effective and efficient policy of solidarity and the redress of international dependency and injustice.

In our era we well know how the original socialist formulations of an unspecific and rhetorical internationalism were translated into reality. We also know the limitations and problems – growing over time – from the experiences of national socialisms. And, above all, we know well the irrationality and aberrations which the concept of 'socialism in one country' produced, which was rhetorically alluded to as the 'patriarchy of socialism'. The idea of a 'ghetto' or a 'paradise for the privileged' is incompatible with the core aspirations of socialism. The key question today is determining how we can work efficiently – and not in a merely rhetorical manner – towards the development of solidarity in international policies which are consistent with socialism.

The nature of international inequalities, coupled with cultural, political and geographical diversity, makes it very difficult to formulate socialist options and approaches which are valid – and applicable – for all countries. We have to start from the complexity of international reality and not allow ourselves to fall once again into the trap of making mere proclamations and rhetorical international declarations which promise nothing and fail to resolve anything. For economic, technological and cultural reasons, the socialism of the future must establish itself as a feasible project in given regions and countries. But, likewise, it must create the conditions to make this an effective and

practical project internationally. What this amounts to is achieving a new political hegemony for international solidarity. Drawing on its own experience, European socialism should actively undertake the development both of arguments and organisations which can achieve this aim. This means mobilising European capacity in the service of international solidarity and development cooperation, based neither on expansionist projects nor on the establishment or maintenance of any form of dependency or domination. Could we manage such an approach and such a project? Can we equip ourselves with the new organisational structures which new situations demand? Will we receive sufficient support from the prosperous and, in many respects, uncommitted sections of European society? With what initiatives and social support will it be possible to construct and promote advancement of the socialism of the future?

Historically, socialism was promoted fundamentally by the rising working class in traditional industrialised societies. Now, however, with automation of the workplace it is necessary to ask oneself frankly who is going to make up the social majority for the development, by peaceful and democratic methods, of the socialist project for the future. Could the socialism of the future be treated as a mere ideological project without specific social followers or adherents? It is still too early to resolve all these questions. But what is clear today is that we have to understand that the socialism of the future must of necessity have a broader-based and more diversified social support than it has traditionally had. Special attention must be paid to the capacity of groups without employment or work, such as the 'underclass' and the new social movements. These themselves represent a new social and political awareness stemming from significant problems in contemporary society (difficulties for youth employment, new forms of isolation, environment problems, women's lack of equality, etc.).

Contrary to what many may think, socialism can find a new impetus in these social circumstances if it is capable of adding to its traditional bases of support the aspiration for change of other social groups whose political awareness is not defined by the work process or the terms of their employment. It is this perspective which will enable the socialism of the future to be a project with majority support, capable both of strengthening itself and contributing in a peaceful way to the development of democratic practice.

## CONCLUSIONS

Socialism today is the central factor for the aspirations of human emancipation and social progress. The ideals of socialism embody the strongest desires for civilised progress towards forms of social life which are more firmly and coherently based on the criteria of liberty, equality, harmony and social balance. Likewise, today, the socialist ideal is an emancipating force for those social groups which have not achieved basic individual and social rights, nor have benefited from the possibilities permitted by scientific and technical progress. At the same time, the socialist ideal is fundamental for the overall consciousness of the planet's social equilibrium and environmental needs. For such reasons the socialism of the coming decades must be constructed on the foundation of specific demands of given groups, but also based on an awareness of future needs.

Socialism is basically a project for the future. The project can – and should – guarantee a future suffused with hopes for the progress of human civilisation. This must be the guiding principle of specific theoretical and political actions. If we consider with sufficient historical perspective, and with a sufficiently broad theory, the current balance sheet which socialism can present we should agree that we have achieved sufficient maturity to confront a new stage in the development of its emancipating ideal. When one analyses what has happened in the industrialised world in the last century, one can say that in the long run socialism has won the moral and political battle over the economic and social model which the great theorists of capitalism expounded. In reality no one today dares to defend the moral hypotheses upon which these theorists and practitioners of *laissez-faire* and pre-social capitalism based their ideas. Even the most recalcitrant neo-conservative theorists of our time are convinced of the impracticality of such a social model. Not least, the globalisation of information, with its immediacy and closeness, strengthens moral consciousness and rejects the most repulsive and obvious forms of inequality, oppression, exploitation and social injustice.

It is for such reasons that we can consider that the original version of capitalism, which exalted uninhibited, unrestrained competition and which placed a priority upon the value of 'things' (merchandise) over persons, has been defeated on both moral and practical grounds. Politically this defeat is most evident in the social, employment and economic achievements of labour and of the

