

Excerpt from *Reflections on the Failure of Socialism* (1955)

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People who read these reflections may wonder how I arrived at the understanding that socialism has failed. I am describing the whole experience in another book, but here a brief glance at the intellectual road I traveled may be helpful. It has not been so winding a road as some may think.

I stated the aim of my political activities in two articles in the *Masses* in 1916: not to reform men, or even primarily reform the world, but to “make all men as free to live and realize the world as it is possible for them to be.” In this, the years have brought no change.

In those same articles I dismissed Marx’s philosophic system, his idea that socialism is historically necessary, as “a rationalization of his wish,” and declared: “We must alter and remodel what he wrote, and make of it and of what else our recent science offers, a doctrine that shall clearly have the nature of hypothesis.”

The hypothesis, as I conceived it, was that by intensifying the working class struggle, and pursuing it to victory either at the polls or in a revolution, we could “socialize the means of production,” and thus extend democracy from politics into economics. That, I thought, would give every man a chance to build a life in his own chosen way. It would “liberate the proletariat and therewith all society,” to use a Marxian formula that I liked to quote.

To me, in short, socialism was not a philosophy of history, or of life—much less a religion—but a large-scale social-scientific experiment. I came to it by a process of thought rather than feeling. I had no personal envies or resentments; I was happily circumstanced and wisely brought up; I thought of myself as free. I wanted to extend that freedom to all men; I wanted to see a society without distinctions of caste, class, race, money-power—without exploitation, without the “wage system.” I knew this could not be brought about by preaching; I had observed the effects of preaching. I was captivated by the idea that it might be brought about by a self-interested struggle on the part of those most deprived under the present system. Thus the class struggle as a method was the very center of my socialist belief. The articles quoted above were titled “Towards Liberty, The Method of Progress,” and they were meant to be the first chapters of a book.

It was juvenile of me to imagine that humanity as a whole, especially by splitting itself into two halves, could turn a whole period of history into a scientific experiment. Science requires a scientist, or at least an engineer, and the engineer, in this case, would have to have dictatorial power. But that thought, if it entered my mind, I managed to elude. I worked out a socialism of my own which enabled me to take an independent position on many concrete questions: feminism, population control, peace, and war. Both the doctrine of class morals and the propaganda of class hate I rejected. I could think freely on such questions because my socialism was not a mystical cure-all, but merely a plan which I

considered practical for solving the one specific problem of making freedom more general and democracy more democratic.

Although I was a member of the Socialist Party, the magazines I edited from 1912 to 1922, the *Masses* and the *Liberator*, were arrantly independent, and I was pretty regularly flayed alive by the party officials for some heresy or other. It was usually a revolutionary heresy. I was decidedly at the red end of the party spectrum. Still, it wasn't always the reformists as against the revolutionists that I attacked. As often it was the dogmatism of both. Naturally, in my attempt to make Marxism over into an experimental science, I waged a continual war on the bigotry, the cant, the know-it-allism, of the party priesthood. This I think distinguished the policy of the old *Masses* and the *Liberator* as much as their militant insistence on the class struggle. I was always close friends with the I.W.W., and on good terms even with the anarchists, although I lectured them on their childish innocence of the concept of method. I was not afraid, either, of the word liberal with a small l, although I had my own definition of it. "A liberal mind," I wrote in the *Masses* for September 1917, "is a mind that is able to imagine itself believing anything. It is the only mind that is capable of judging beliefs, or that can hold strongly without bigotry to a belief of its own."

When the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia in October 1917, shocking the whole world of progressive and even moderate socialist opinion, I backed them to the limit in the *Liberator*. I raised the money to send John Reed to Russia and published his articles that grew into the famous book, *Ten Days That Shook the World*. I was about the only "red" still out of jail in those violent days, and my magazine was for a time the sole source of unbewildered information about what was happening in Russia. Its circulation reached a peak of sixty thousand.

When Lenin's pamphlet, called in English "The Soviets at Work," was published—the same that won Whittaker Chambers to communism—I was enraptured. The monumental practicality, the resolute factualness, of Lenin's mind, combined as almost never before with a glowing regard for poor and oppressed people, anxiety over their freedom, devotion to the idea of their entrance into power, swept me off my feet. I still think it one of the noblest—and now saddest—of political documents. It convinced me that Lenin's mind was experimental. In every line he seemed to realize my ideal of a scientific revolutionist. I greeted him in two articles in the *Liberator* as "a Statesman of a New Order," and dedicated myself with no doctrinal reservations to the defense of his principles of action and his Soviet regime.

Attacking those who accused him of dogmatism, I exclaimed: "I have never seen a sign in any speech or writing of Lenin that he regarded the Marxian theory as anything more than a scientific hypothesis in process of verification."

There were few translations from Russian in those days. I had to go to Russia and learn the language before I found out that Lenin was a true believer in the Marxian mystique. He was, to be sure, more high-handed with its postulates than any other believer—much more so than Trotsky. He had the trick, as Karl Radek once remarked to me, of "deciding a question on the basis of the facts and then fixing it up with the theory afterward." He also had Hegel's notion of "dialectic logic" to help him with this trick. I did not know enough then to distinguish between the limited freedom dispensed to the faithful by this ingenious notion, and the complete freedom of a mind dealing only with facts, purposes, and plans of action. I gave my heart to Lenin more completely than I have to any other leader and fought for the Bolsheviks on the battlefield of American opinion with all the influence my voice and magazine possessed. From the October revolution until Baron Wrangel was swept out of the Crimea, I was engaged in a civil war, and my socialist convictions grew hard and firm. It took a long time after that, a steady and merciless bombardment of hostile and unanswerable facts, to unsettle them.

## Going to Russia

Instead of liberating the mind of man, the Bolshevik Revolution locked it into a state's prison tighter than ever before. Still, I was far enough from fanatical when I sailed for Russia in 1922 to remark to my friends that I was "going over to find out whether what I have been saying is true." I arrived in September, in time to learn a little Russian before I attended the fourth congress of the Third International. I was not a delegate and had no official status, but the *Liberator* was well enough known so that I was hospitably received as a guest. Later on, Trotsky, who consented to cooperate with me on a biographical portrait, gave me a portentous document bearing his signature and the seal of the Red Army, asking everybody in Russia to receive me cordially and attend to my needs. I traveled wherever I wanted to with that document, and saw whatever I asked to see.

I traveled at the height of the swift recovery that followed the adoption of the New Economic Policy, and I experienced Soviet life at its best. Although surprised and shocked by some features of the experiment, I found ground for great hope also. Only one thing seemed to me calamitously bad. That was the bigotry and Byzantine scholasticism which had grown up around the sacred scriptures of Marxism. Hegel, Marx, Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin—these men's books contained for the Bolsheviks the last word of human knowledge. They were not science, they were revelation. Nothing remained for living thinkers to do but apply them, gloss them, dispute about them, expatiate on them, find in them the germs of every new thought or thing that came into the world.

Instead of liberating the mind of man, the Bolshevik Revolution locked it into a state's prison tighter than ever before. No flight of thought was conceivable, no poetic promenade even, no sneak through the doors or peep out of a window in this pre-Darwinian dungeon called Dialectic Materialism. No one in the western world has any idea of the degree to which Soviet minds are closed and sealed tight against any idea but the premises and conclusions of this antique system of wishful thinking. So far as concerns the advance of human understanding, the Soviet Union is a gigantic roadblock, armed, fortified, and defended by indoctrinated automatons made out of flesh, blood, and brains in the robot factories they call schools.

I felt this barbarous thing more keenly than any other disappointment in the land of my dreams. I was sure it contained the seeds of priest rule and police rule. Any state religion, as all the great liberals have pointed out, is death to human freedom. The separation of church and state is one of the main measures of protection against tyranny. But the Marxian religion makes this separation impossible, for its creed is politics; its church is the state. There is no hope within its dogmas of any evolution toward the free society it promises.

For these reasons, instead of writing the travel stories expected of me about "Life under the Soviets," I went into the reading room of the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow and got down to work on my old unfinished partial torso of a book, *Towards Liberty, the Method of Progress*. Although not deceived that anybody would pay prompt attention to me, I thought it my duty to the revolution to attack this roadblock, this prodigy of obtuseness parading as ultimate wisdom, in the only way it could be attacked, by an unanswerable demonstration of the conflict between Marxism and the scientific method.

I stayed a year and nine months in Russia, and put in a major part of my time learning Russian and reading, mostly in that language, the essential literature on which the actions of the Bolsheviks were based. Leaving Russia in June 1924, I spent the next three years in western Europe, where I finished a book on the subject and named it *Marx and Lenin, the Science of Revolution*. It was published in London in 1926. The Anglo-Saxon world had so little interest then in Marxian theory that I had to advance the money for its publication. But Albert and Charles Boni bought sheets and published it a year later in New York. La

Nouvelle Revue Française published a French translation the following year. My money investment was well repaid. But my success in undermining the roadblock in Russia was not conspicuous.

The copy I sent to the Marx-Engels Institute was returned by the Post Office marked: "Denied admission by the Department of Publications." The only murmur to come out of Russia was from the great scientist, Ivan Pavlov, who surprised me with a letter in his own hand sent fearlessly through the mail: "I endorse completely your criticism of the philosophical foundation of Marxism." And he added this contribution to my painfully slow recovery from socialism: "There isn't any science of revolution, and there won't be for a long time. There is only a groping of the life force, partly guided empirically, of those who have a much-embracing and strong common sense. Our Bolshevik Revolution, with its details so disastrous to our intellectual and moral development, I consider an anachronism which (of this I am convinced) will repeat itself in this form never and nowhere in the civilized world. Such is my deepest understanding of these matters."

### **Holding on to Leninism**

In that book, I wrote as a believer in the Soviet system, and I still imputed to Lenin a stride forward, however unconscious, toward the attitude of experimental science, calling him by contrast with his more orthodox opponents an "engineer of revolution." There was a great deal of truth in this, but I still managed to elude its implications. I thought it was a wonderful and hopeful thing that Lenin had succeeded, by basing himself on the Marxian analysis of class forces, in throwing a net over the whole of Russian society, and gathering the power into his hands and that of a party dedicated to building socialism.

This theoretic conception stood firm in my mind, even though I had seen before leaving Russia what I now believe to be its direct and normal consequence: the usurpation of power by a tyrant having no honest instinct for the liberties of men. I had not only seen but very carefully studied the plot by which Stalin made himself master after Lenin's death. Besides studying his maneuvers, I attended the party congress of May 1924, at which his open attack was launched and Trotsky's prestige in the party destroyed. Behind the scenes at that congress, Trotsky told me in whispers the drift and essential details of the suppressed document called *Lenin's Testament*. I was leaving Russia in a few days, and I spent those days gathering, with his encouragement, what further documents I needed to expose the plot and explain it. To do this I laid aside my work on Marxism and wrote the little book called *Since Lenin Died*, which remains, I think, an authentic source for the history of the conflict about leadership which followed Lenin's death.

In the evolution of my socialist opinions that book marked a rather modest step. My conclusion was only a caution to revolutionists in other countries against accepting in the name of Leninism "the international authority of a group against whom Lenin's dying words were a warning, and who have preserved that authority by suppressing the essential texts of Lenin." Fourteen years would pass before I was able to see in that group, not only an enemy of Lenin's plans, but a result of the revolution as conceived and engineered by him.

I had said enough in my two books, however, to ostracize me completely from the official communist movement. When I came home from Europe in 1927 most of my old political friends refused to speak to me on the street. I was a traitor, a renegade, a pariah, a veritable untouchable, so far as the communists were concerned. And as the bitterness mounted, this mood spread to the radical, and even in some degree to the liberal, intelligentsia as a whole. To get rid of my facts, I was of course promptly and indelibly labeled "Trotskyist," although I neither agreed with Trotsky's Marxism nor ever shared the delusion that he might become the successful leader of a party. That the policies of Lenin and the original aims of the Bolsheviks were defended by Trotsky was made unmistakably clear in my little

book, and will be unmistakably clear in history, I believe, if honest history survives. But my loyalty was not to any leader or group. My loyalty was still to the working class, to the idea of progress through class struggle. In principle, I was merely supplying the international working class and its leaders with information essential to the intelligent conduct of the struggle.

The struggle is still for freedom; the main facts are still economic; the arch-enemy is still the soft-headed idealist who refuses to face facts. With the same purpose I translated and published in 1928 the suppressed program and documents of the exiled Left Opposition of the Russian Communist party, calling the book *The Real Situation in Russia*. As the text was theirs rather than mine, I gave the royalties to a small branch of the Trotskyist Opposition which had by that time been formed in America. This added to a growing impression that I was a personal follower of Trotsky, although my private thoughts about his failure to outmaneuver Stalin were anything but those of a follower. It was always Lenin's policies, and the truth about what was happening in Russia, that I was defending. My translation of Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* was made with admiration but not endorsement. To me that book is the supreme and most compelling application of the Marxian metaphysics to history, far outdoing the similar efforts of Marx himself. But I think it will be the last. No giant will ever again drive facts into those forms at such an expense of intellectual power.

A book which marks a longer step in my own development, emotional if not intellectual, was my *Artists in Uniform*, written in 1932-33, and published in 1934. There I described the hideous dictatorship in literature and the fine arts set up under Stalin's knout, and the obsequious infantilism of Americans like Mike Gold, Joe Freeman, Bob Minor, Hugo Geliert, Maurice Becker, William Gropper, my ex-colleagues on the *Liberator*, who of their own free will knelt down to it. No one who had believed in the socialist revolution as a liberation of spirit, as we all in those days so loudly did, could with intellectual honor pretend that this was it or any step in the direction of it. I did not pull any punches in that book, but I still spoke as a revolutionary socialist, a non-party old Bolshevik. I said in my introduction:

"I am on the side of the Soviets and the proletarian class struggle. But I think that critical truth-speaking is an element of that struggle essential to its success . . . . The efforts toward socialist construction in the Soviet Union must inevitably serve the world movement in some sense as a guide. These efforts should not be followed, however, as a seamstress follows a pattern, but as a scientist repeats an experiment, progressively correcting the errors and perfecting the successful strokes."

Those were, I think, my last published words as a defender of the Soviet Union.

## **Losing Faith**

It is not easy to set dates in such a matter. "Who can determine when it is that the scales in the balance of opinion begin to turn, and what was a greater probability in behalf of a belief becomes a positive doubt against it?" Cardinal Newman asks the question in his *Apologia*, and I must say that with all the documents I have in hand, I cannot be exact as to the moment when I abandoned my attitude of "loyal to the Soviet Union but opposed to the Stalin leadership," and decided that thanks to that leadership the hope of socialism in Russia was dead. I only know that during the year 1933 those positive doubts grew so strong that I abandoned my pro-Soviet lectures, and remained silent for about two years. In the spring of 1936, I wrote an essay, "The End of Socialism in Russia," which was published in *Harper's Magazine*, January 1937, and afterward by Little, Brown & Company as a book. "To my mind, there is not a hope left for the classless society in present-day Russia," I said in that book. But I still regarded Stalin's totalitarian dictatorship as an enemy, rather than a result, of the policies of Lenin.

It took me another two years to arrive at the knowledge that Lenin's methods—or in other words bolshevik Marxism—were to blame. This further slow step in my enlightenment was recorded in another book, published in 1940, and called *Stalin's Russia and the Crisis in Socialism*.

“I now think,” I wrote in that book, “that this brilliant device for engineering a seizure of power, invented by Lenin with a super-democratic purpose, has shown itself to be in fatal conflict with the purpose. I think that an armed seizure of power by a highly organized minority party, whether in the name of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, the Glory of Rome, the Supremacy of the Nordics, or any other slogan that may be invented, and no matter how ingeniously integrated with the masses of the population, will normally lead to the totalitarian state. ‘Totalitarian state’ is merely the modern name for tyranny. It is tyranny with up-to-date technique. And the essence of that technique is a reverse use of the very thing upon whose forward action Lenin ultimately relied, the machinery of public education.”

This change of opinion invalidated much that I had said in the second part of my book, *Marx and Lenin, the Science of Revolution*. Moreover, I had learned a great deal more about Marxism since that book was published in 1926. Its demonstration of the unscientific, and indeed superstitious, character of Marx's whole mode of thought seemed more and more important as the battle between the Soviets and western civilization developed. It was my main contribution to the battle, and I wrote it over again as maturely and carefully as I know how. With the title *Marxism: Is It Science?*, it was published in the autumn of that same year, 1940.

Even then, although rejecting Lenin's system of party control, I had not decided that “the socialist hypothesis” was disproven. That decision, or the inner force to confront that fact, arrived in the following year. And in this case, I do remember the precise moment. At a cocktail party given by Freda Utley—I think for her friend Bertrand Russell—during a conversation about some last and most significantly dreadful news that had come out of Russia, she suddenly asked me:

“Aside from these Russian developments, do you still believe in the socialist idea?”

I said, “No.”

## **No More Socialism**

The whole idea of extending freedom, or justice, or equality, or any other civilized value, to the lower classes through common ownership of the means of production was a delusive dream. Although I had never said this to myself, the answer came from the depths of my heart and mind. It seemed perfectly clear, once the question was boldly put, that if the socialist hypothesis were valid in general, some tiny shred of the benefits promised by it would have appeared when the Russian capitalists were expropriated and production taken over by the state, no matter how untoward the circumstances.

By that time everything in Russia was worse from the standpoint of socialist ideals than it had been under the regime of the Tsar. I did not need any additional experiments such as that in Nazi Germany, or in England, or the obvious drift in other countries, to convince me. I was sure that the whole idea of extending freedom, or justice, or equality, or any other civilized value, to the lower classes through common ownership of the means of production was a delusive dream, a bubble that had taken over a century to burst.

I have never had any hesitations or regrets about the decision—only about the unconscionably long time it took me to reach it. When I am denounced as a turncoat by the true believers it does indeed bring a blush to my cheek, but only because it took me so long to turn my coat. I sadly regret the precious twenty years I spent muddling and messing

around with this idea, which with enough mental clarity and moral force I might have seen through when I went to Russia in 1922.

This present book contains my principal conclusions, or the principal things I have learned politically, since making that decision. I imagine some of its readers will echo the remark of Upton Sinclair in a recent letter, that I have merely “gone from one extreme to the other.” I think, on the contrary, that the step is shorter from hard-headed class-struggle socialism to a firm defense of the free-market economy than to the old wishful notion of a high-minded slide into utopia. It is a straighter step to take. The struggle is still for freedom; the main facts are still economic; the arch-enemy is still the soft-headed idealist who refuses to face facts.

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