

# SOCIALIST TRADITIONS AND THE TRINITY OF *LIBERTÉ*, *ÉGALITÉ*, *FRATERNITÉ*

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1

As a rule, socialists have made benevolently condescending allusions to the first revolutions of modernity, as well as to the documents forged in them. They were merely 'bourgeois' upheavals or they nurtured naive illusions, wrapped up in grand words; this is how sophisticated socialist criticism reads. And this is why *liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*, although preserved, have been relegated to an archive of relics in the socialist movements and their historiography. And yet for decades it has been dawning upon more thoughtful socialists that whatever their movements stood for, short of the communist 'innovations', could be expressed in the language of those 'obsolete' documents. An attempt was even made to deduce all major postulates of socialism from the American 'Declaration of Independence'. My thesis here would go one step further; it proposes that socialism did not introduce a single new substantive principle on the basis of which modern society can be established. What socialism did in its better hours was to undertake interpretations of these principles, interpretations which were undeniably crucial for the modern arrangement.

This is a far from derogatory statement. The year of 1989, with the happy coincidence of the retrospective celebrations of the French Revolution and the grand spectacle of the revolutions of Eastern Europe that shook the world, was the appropriate moment to reflect upon early modernity as a single continuous revolu-

tionary cycle which now seems to have come to an end. The major principles and values of the new arrangement, setting it apart from all pre-modern histories, above all the values of freedom and life, were fixed at the very beginning of the cycle. In this sense, we once again write history and build theory *ab urbe condita*. Modernity *in statu nascendi* also created a vocabulary which cannot be transcended. The parallel cases of Hitler and Stalin bear out the truth of this statement. Their crimes were indistinguishable; both remain eternal mementos in our annals. But Hitler, with his forthright negation of freedom and with his overt contempt for the value of life, immediately provoked the unmitigated hostility of all those who were not rallying around him, and after the military defeat, he has become a discarded option. Stalin's Machiavellian use of the language of liberty misled millions for a long time. The untranscendable founding principles of our historical era are the basis of the only kind of fundamentalism modernity knows and tolerates. But, true to the long-standing traditions of European culture, these foundations need constant interpretation in order to stay alive and remain vigorous. The best of socialist efforts were precisely such interpretations and comments on the basic texts of modernity (while entertaining the self-delusion that they represented a radically new position).

Take two of the major socialist terms which captured the fantasy and triggered the actions of modern men and women. The first is exploitation (which has been embraced and internalised by the broadest possible

working class constituency of socialism), the second is alienation (which was mostly for the consumption of intellectuals, also of a new postwar generation, and generally for the dissatisfied of the middle classes). Exploitation, as long as we are not in the murky waters of Marxist pseudo-economics, has two clear and interpretable significations. In the first sense, it refers to the basic fact that the worker has no influence over the surplus which has been produced by him or her beyond the wage. In the second sense, it is the expression of a widespread feeling that people, in a particular age and a particular country, are living miserably. The first sense of the term exploitation is a comment on the inadequate economic power of the workers in modern societies as well as a comment on what broad masses of people feel to be flawed social justice (or an expression of the still vigorous spirit of natural law in modern society). The second sense is a comment on the standards of living of the workers, perceived to be unequal to the point of being unbearable. Therefore, they are interpretations either of liberty or of equality.

The case of alienation is more complicated given the richness of content of the philosophical term, as a result of which there has never been consensus on its meaning even among philosophers. But the following shades of meaning are regularly included in the concept. Alienation stands for the impoverishment of the individual (vis-à-vis the enforced enrichment of the species); in this sense, alienation denotes a lost or never gained individual autonomy. Its hypothesised overcoming, the merger of the species and the individual, where, as Marx remarked, the particular will be the general, heralds the advent of rich and incommensurable individuals. Further, de-alienation promises an interrelationship between these rich and incommensurable individuals which is fundamentally different from the jungle of competitive relationships. In the first sense, alienation is an interpretation of freedom (qua autonomy). In the second, theory makes the too audacious proposal of eliminating the whole issue of equality (as there can be neither equality nor inequality between incommensurable entities). In the third, certain predictions are made on the future of *fraternité*.

The objection can of course be made that there is no necessity to translate the much more sophisticated language of socialism into the obsolete one of the documents of foundation. My thesis is, on the contrary, that such a translation is a political and moral obligation for socialism, unless it intends to speak a jargon separate from the lingua franca of modernity, a secretive lingo which is incomprehensible for the majority of modern men and women, one which harbours suspicious intentions (and this was the case for decades with the communist 'party Chinese'). A translation of this kind is also a test, for it will show which elements of the

socialist ideology are compatible with the principles of foundation and which aim at their false transcendence. And it is my hypothesis that in each act of comparison and translation, the language of the trinity *liberté, égalité, fraternité* will turn out to be the basic text to be interpreted. The socialist addenda will appear as interpretations of this basic text.

## 2

The socialist interpretations of *liberté* implied, in the main, two ways of taking the concept of liberty to task. In the first case, vehement objections were made to the actual extent of *liberté*. The fundamental accusation was one of hypocrisy. *Liberté* was declared to be universal, whereas in fact it remained limited, via the electoral census and the distinction between *citoyens actifs et passifs*, often not to more than six or eight per cent of the adult populace, and even in the very best case not ranging further than half of them. From this interpretation cum critique, powerful movements grew which achieved the major political victory of modern democracy, the extension of the right to elect and to be elected to whole of the male populace. (Which shows immediately the limitation of socialist political imagination that could only think in terms of class but not in those of gender.) Socialism in its heroic age, often in spite of the ironical remarks of its own founding fathers about mere political rights, fought in alliance with the liberals for the universalisation of *liberté*.

In the second case, socialism accepted the Cartesian definition of *liberté* as a power to do or not to do something, and it asked the following question. Do the workers have the power, that is the freedom, not to work in factories under the truly inhuman conditions of the industrial revolution? If they have no alternative to accepting those frightening conditions, set by their social Darwinist masters, are they free, in spite of the solemn declaration of their liberties? Was Marx's description of an 'emancipated slavery' an exaggeration altogether? And not even the considerable improvement of working conditions, which happened in this century under the pressure of working-class movements, eliminates entirely the validity of the inquiry. The question still resounds in the modern world, and the thrust for the possibility of alternative occupations and lifestyles will remain on the socialist agenda in the next century. In this case, the critical interpretation of *liberté* was addressed to the discrepancy between the principle and its 'realisation'.

Two diametrically opposed strategies of socialism emerged from this challenging of *liberté*. The first strategy was 'dialectical'. It took for a fact and a premise the hypocrisy inherent in the practice of *liberté* and it

drew conclusions from it which were devastating for the very principle. 'Dialectic' meant here the following procedure. Every category had to be scrutinised critically as potentially 'ideological'. Their 'real' meaning had to be fathomed, and this could be achieved by their outright negation (and, of course, by the subsequent elevation of the concept to a 'higher' level). This is, for example, how the thesis of a revolutionary, or proletarian, dictatorship as a higher type of democracy was conceived. The premise of the second strategy was the recognition of the discrepancy between the principles and their 'realisation' in social practices, and the conclusion proposed the formulation of such policies, on the very basis of the infracted principles, which could aim at closing, or at least narrowing the gap. This bifurcation of socialism became most manifest in the conflict between communism and social democracy. But it had been there prior to the conflict, and it is not likely to vanish completely even after the collapse of communism.

Socialist movements and theories normally also addressed the question of *whose* liberty has been declared and 'realised' in modernity. 'Man', born free and endowed with inalienable rights, appeared as a dubious entity to them. There were four levels at which socialism replied to the self-posed question; those of human species, society, a social class and the individual. On the level of the human species, socialism, for the most part, reiterated the banalities of *fraternité*. It had neither a theory nor even a programme for an integrated and emancipated human race. Marx was here the only exception who elaborated a grand philosophy of the species, but it was based on the fusion of the individual and species; and the individual person, rather than the sum total of the human race, served as its model.

On the second level, the queries were, more often than not, wrongly posed in socialist thought. In the first place, *societas* and *libertas* were simultaneously posited because *socius*, in the modern usage, is the human being who enters into a relationship with others, instead of being born into it. In this sense, every 'society' is already an emancipated domain when it is compared to 'community' or kinship (and discussing 'pre-modern societies' is the problematic modernisation of historical sociology). Strictly politically speaking, 'free society' can only mean an arrangement in which human liberties are publicly and universally declared without formal curtailments and without the simultaneous existence of such mechanisms that would render this declaration null and void from the very beginning. 'Autonomous' society is a meaningful term only in so far as there are heteronomous societies. We can think of three instances of the latter. First, when law is given to a society by another (where the term is tantamount to a 'group', a 'tribe' or a 'race' in pre-modern times, and to 'an alien nation state' in modern times). Second, a society is het-

eronomous when its present (those who constitute it here and now) is dominated totally by the past, by tradition. Third, it is heteronomous if it is dominated by 'nature', (which is the exception, rather than the rule, in modernity). These investigations, on which socialism wasted so much energy, brought precious little yield for the understanding of modernity and for forging meaningful socialist strategies in it.

*Liberté*, meaning the liberty of a hitherto unemancipated class, was the principal issue of early socialism. And it brought unfading glory on socialists that they achieved their goal in a dual sense. Political liberties of the workers were granted by the system of universal suffrage, and the 'social question' was legally recognised by the social legislation of the welfare state. But when socialists made efforts to go beyond this level, and particularly when they embarked on the myth of the proletariat, as a distinguished human group which allegedly holds the key to some sort of mysterious puzzle of history, they were simply led astray by their political and philosophical zeal. A particularly dangerous version of the myth was proposed by Marx, on the occasion of the Paris Commune and elsewhere, in terms of which the more than political, the so-called 'human', emancipation of the proletariat – in simpler words, the abolition of wage labour via revolutionary expropriation – has the inherent prerogative of stripping other human groups, temporarily or permanently, of their civil and political rights. The proletarian mythology, apart from all nonsensical elements inherent in it (the most blatant one being the 'proletariat as the new ruling class'), meant a reactionary regression in comparison to the predominantly universalist conception of liberty in modernity.

Socialism was at its weakest when it came to investigate the only genuine subject of liberty, the individual person. Here the socialist contribution to developed modernity is clearly inferior to liberalism, and this is not by chance. In a competitive, profit-dominated world, socialists were inclined to accept the self-image of capitalism and regard the person (an isolated being) as 'naturally' egoistic. The antidote to egoism seemed to come from some kind of communitarian network alone, be it the archaic community or the 'community' of a modern social class. We do not do full justice to the socialists' philosophical astuteness if we state that they 'could not grasp' that not only egoism, but also its opposite, solidarity, has its seat in the individual; further, that 'it was beyond their comprehension' that a community (of both the archaic and the modern type) is nothing but the network of individuals' relations to other individuals. Marx, not to mention lesser minds, was certainly aware of these truths. However, a movement's thinking and judging is dominated by its typical constituency. And the constituency of the golden age of socialism consisted of workers who came to socialism

as members of a class, with the grievances of their class, and not primarily in their capacity as individuals. They raised their grievances, among them their collective disenfranchisement, not as individual but as collective class issues. And when the individuals *par excellence*, the modern intellectuals, flocked to the movement, in the storm of the first World War and after, they did the serious disservice of denigrating the cause of individual freedom as a pathology of the capitalist age.

And yet socialism has great tasks ahead of it with regard to the freedom of the individual – provided it wants to survive and rejuvenate. In the world defined by the revolutions of the West, the period of totalitarianism with a race or class ideology is over for the foreseeable future. But the foundations of the individual's freedom are far from guaranteed. The alliance of liberalism with democracy is still young and fragile; it has more charters of human rights than a culture of tolerant habits behind it. Democracy, devoid of a liberal tradition and a sense of high culture, has tremendous totalitarian potential (as McCarthyism in the United States sufficiently exemplified). There are also new, race, ethnic, and religion based types of fundamentalism emerging. The very context, 'Western culture', in which alone the principle of individual freedom has been conceived, is being questioned from within and without. An aggressive radicalism of a confused type, one which cannot be pinned down by either a 'leftist' or a 'rightist' label, known as biopolitics, focusing on race and gender issues and displaying methods and an ethos remarkably similar to those of defunct communism, has also appeared on the horizon. In this far from untroubled situation, socialism, if it still has some of its older libertarian energies, can show its mettle, in alliance with liberalism, in defending the liberty of the individual.

3

Although socialism is normally associated with egalitarianism, if one looks at socialists' own declarations, this statement is true only from its negative aspect. Socialism (of all kinds) has been a traditional critic of the inequality created by the capitalist market system. Viewed from the positive side, however, the result is much more ambiguous. A consistent and terroristically inclined egalitarianism, Babeuf's *égalité de fait*, emerged immediately from the storm of the French Revolution. Marx did include Babeuf in the calendar of the martyrs of socialism but he branded his position as one of 'crude communism' which is tyrannical, an enemy of culture and which proposes a generalised rule of envy. Absolute and substantive egalitarianism was the exception rather than the rule during the period of the Second International. Social democracy advanced solutions in terms of

social justice which meant 'more', not absolute, equality; and this remained its strategy when it drafted the charters of the welfare state. In a quick and superficial overview one could come to the conclusion that communism abandoned egalitarianism, which had been labelled by Stalin as a 'petty bourgeois' position, and that it used arguments about the inequality inherent in capitalism only to score points in a propaganda war. If this is our thesis, we shall see Pol Pot and the rule of the Khmer Rouge as a mere episode of absolute egalitarianism within communism, one which fully realised all the nightmares contemporary observers had been predicting about the reality of the Babeuvian proposal.

However, this would be a too facile way of settling accounts. For at least in one crucial respect, communism, which otherwise created an almost feudal system of hierarchical bonuses and prerogatives, the so-called *nomenklatura*, was indeed absolutistically and tyrannically egalitarian: it robbed everyone who lived within its orbit equally – of even the socially most insignificant form of property. Its official and tautological distinction between 'private' and 'personal' property only concealed the fact that the totalitarian state has always upheld the right to prescribe what amount and what mix of consumer goods can be held by the individual person or household. That the employees of the state, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the populace, were not allowed to have any kind of property, is sufficient proof for anyone who is only slightly familiar with the reality of Soviet-type society. The property relationship of the peasantry, forced into cooperatives, is a more complex issue, and here it will suffice to remark that the peasants could use their collective enterprise as a property, and not as a trust fund of the state to which they were enchained, only in the last decades, and even then, only in a few communist countries. It is more difficult to grasp that the *nomenklatura*, or the party apparat, the omnipotent master of society, was also robbed of property-owning. Here, I can only refer to *Dictatorship Over Needs*, in which, together with my fellow authors, I proved that in terms of ownership, the state property of totalitarian socialism was the property of a corporation. The members of the corporation were powerful and, in relative terms, well-endowed, but they were not proprietors. The moral of the story of the Soviet-type society in this respect is that without some kind of property, liberty is inconceivable. And if one intends to comprehend contemporary Eastern and Central Europe in its privatisation fever, one should, instead of sermonising to them about capitalistic greed, grasp that their thirst for property expresses, among other things, a need for a haven from the state and for an alternative lifestyle. And this thirst has been created by the too-long nightmare of an egalitarian regime which reduced everyone to nil as far as property holding was concerned.

Once communism has gone, and a world order, based on the global market with democratic interventions has been consolidated, socialists have to face seriously the theoretical issues inherent in *égalité*. The major premise of all relevant considerations of equality is the circumstance that the concept has two aspects, those of equality in terms of property ownership and equality in terms of the evaluation of the individual. The distinction is age-old and needs no further comment, apart from pointing out that its second aspect means the treatment of the individual in abstraction from his/her property or social rank. The major innovation modernity brought into the treatment of this ancient issue was to create the dramatic contrast between the two aspects of equality. The fundamental radical tenet since the French Revolution has been that any solution of the second aspect (equality in the evaluation of the individual) is a questionable, and according to certain radicals, a hypocritical and worthless ploy, if there is not at the same time some sort of equality in terms of property. This tension was all the more intensified as the initially very flawed treatment of the second aspect, which is basically tantamount to the slogan of 'equality before the law', underwent a process of considerable improvement in the last decades. The system of universal suffrage has been completed in all democratic countries, including voting rights for women. There is some kind of bill of rights and charter of human rights in force in many democratic countries that defends, if imperfectly, the rights of the individual to be different and the like. Certain protective measures against collective discriminations of all kinds are in place or being tested. Even the resident alien now enjoys, in principle at least, the full protection of law, in a beneficial departure from the politics of democracies before the Second World War. With all its deficiencies and loopholes, the project of equality before the law seems to have been completed within the nation state (now it can be applied on a global scale cannot even be touched upon here).

This undeniable progress with regard to the second aspect has intensified the dissatisfaction with the first aspect. Liberal theories may make any amount of effort to convince people, as Bentham did, that in regard to property, the truth holds that what belongs to everyone, belongs to no one, a truth which has been borne out recently by the Soviet experiment. A large number of non-proprietors however, will still hold that the prevailing situation, with consistent equality in one respect, and blatant inequality in the other, is unjust. In addition, there is no hope within our horizon that this tension will ever leave modernity. The road to easy solutions is blocked. In the modern world, unlike in the Aristotelian, no one can seriously formulate the proposal of dividing existing properties into approximately equal units (or at least restricting their immoderate growth). The Soviet

experiment of declaring everyone's confiscated property everyone's collective asset was a stunning confirmation of Bentham's gloomy prediction.

What socialist can consider in the wake of these resounding fiascos is the following theoretical distinction. Property has two aspects: ownership and appropriation. There can be no ownership without the right and the possibility of appropriation, but there can be appropriation (of the produced goods of a civilisation) without ownership. It was always a utopia of early capitalism that ownership alone can define appropriation; a utopia to which not even the dreariest reality of the industrial revolution ever fully corresponded. And the period of this utopia is now over. Strategies can therefore be forged in terms of which appropriation, as one (the social and collective) aspect of property can be emancipated from the other, from ownership, without undermining the market economy and without unleashing violent cycles of expropriation. There is a wide range of social options available behind this abstract proposal, from the state redistribution of funds in order to solve burning social issues to promoting and supporting collective types of ownership. Socialism, mesmerised by the idea of a total collective property, which, in the benevolent versions, will not hurt anyone's interest and which will in fact belong to everyone, has not yet tuned its imaginative power onto the wavelength of this kind of solution, at least not to a sufficient degree.

4

Of the revolutionary trinity, the first two have constantly been subjects of serious political debates, but *fraternité* has become a laughing stock, with its excessive sentimentality and elusive contents. The judgment of posterity is however on a collision course with the perception of the revolutionary age itself. Beethoven's music as a whole, and not just the last movement of the Ninth Symphony, remains a mystery without feeling the aura of *fraternité* in the background, nor can the initial revolutionary anthropology be grasped without it. *Fraternité* was a principle with a dual function in the revolution. Within *la nation*, it complemented the 'rigidity' and 'soullessness' of the law. In this function, *fraternité* did an ambiguous service. On the one hand, it mellowed the harshness of the legal system of early modernity, and emphasised that even the most just law has innocent victims, and also that there are other than legal considerations. On the other, it often incited the rejection of the law and the replacement of it with violent acts. 'Fraternisation' was the name given to the terrorist actions of bullying moderates into submission and obedience in the Paris districts in 1793–4. Outside the revolutionary nation, *fraternité* was meant to be the

principle of what these days we call international relationships, and in the age of nationalism, it quickly turned into sheer hypocrisy. France, even prior to Bonaparte, never behaved in a fraternal fashion to any of the countries she conquered, and the Great Revolution set the example for the repeated acts of 'fraternal support' by the Red Army.

Carl Schmitt may have a point in emphasising that our political concepts have a theological origin, even if my conclusion, drawn from this, is not necessarily similar to his. But there are degrees of difference, and of the revolutionary trinity, *fraternité* was the least secularised. It meant, first, a family union where the bonds were not those of blood, but of a spiritual, sometimes of an outright mystical nature, akin to what Dostoevsky called 'brotherhood in Christ'. Secondly, it expressed the unity and homogeneity of the family as against individual difference. Finally, it claimed to be a principle, standing higher in its indistinctness and elusiveness than any well-defined affiliation and duty in 'normal' life. And it was precisely the barely secularised character of the term which proved unsuitable for the procedures of modernity.

In the nineteenth century, it quickly became a discarded option in both of its functions. Among nation states, it was Nietzsche's principle, the attitude of a 'cold monster', that prevailed. In the revolutionary movements, there were certain signs of *fraternité* among militant and persecuted socialists in the legendary times of the foundation of the movement. The way of addressing each other as 'comrade' was the most visible of them, one which indicated 'family relations'. But early socialist *fraternité* soon gave way to the bureaucratic regulation of relationships in large parties and international organisations. Moreover, there was both a theoretical and an emotional backlash against *fraternité* among the militants of later days. The more the conflicts

between the socialists and their enemies sharpened, the more it was *Kameraderie*, the unemotional solidarity of fighters, which became the virtue of the day.

There was a brief period of resurrection of *fraternité* in the 1960s and 1970s in the New left, a vestige of which now still lingers on in the slogan of 'sisterhood' among feminist groups. But in the new leftist act of resurrecting brother- and sisterhood there was also an emphatic element of drug-induced ecstasy which proved perforce a temporary detour and which is now engulfed by the cult of health of the 1980s and 1990s. And no long-term future can be forecast for this emotionally overloaded principle either. Socialists do feel the need for lifestyles other than those available within the framework of large bureaucratic parties; and they certainly appreciate decency after the moral decay of communism. But there is no sign in the postmodern atmosphere that they would strive to be members of a homogeneous family without preserving their difference.

## 5

Socialists often waste useful time in the quest for principles that are solely 'theirs' within modernity, their own mark of distinction. This is, as I have tried to emphasise throughout, a vain quest: the major principles of modernity have been set at the legendary acts of foundation. The forte of socialism had been for a very long time its capacity to interpret these principles in a radically new fashion. And it is precisely this interpretive faculty that was lost in the communist intermezzo, both on the side of the communists and on the side of those whose energies were almost completely exhausted by opposing communism. Whether or not socialism has a future depends to a very great degree on its capability of regenerating this faculty of original interpretation.