

Toward European Unity, George Orwell

A Socialist today is in the position of a doctor treating an all but hopeless case. As a doctor, it is his duty to keep the patient alive, and therefore to assume that the patient has at least a chance of recovery. As a scientist, it is his duty to face the facts, and therefore to admit that the patient will probably die. Our activities as Socialists only have meaning if we assume that Socialism can be established, but if we stop to consider what probably will happen, then we must admit, I think, that the chances are against us. If I were a bookmaker, simply calculating the probabilities and leaving my own wishes out of account, I would give odds against the survival of civilization within the next few hundred years. As far as I can see, there are three possibilities ahead of us:

1. That the Americans will decide to use the atomic bomb while they have it and the Russians haven't. This would solve nothing. It would do away with the particular danger that is now presented by the U.S.S.R., but would lead to the rise of new empires, fresh rivalries, more wars, more atomic bombs, etc. In any case this is, I think, the least likely outcome of the three, because a preventive war is a crime not easily committed by a country that retains any traces of democracy.

2. That the present 'cold war' will continue until the U.S.S.R., and several other countries, have atomic bombs as well. Then there will only be a short breathing-space before whizz! go the rockets, wallop! go the bombs, and the industrial centres of the world are wiped out, probably beyond repair. Even if any one state, or group of states, emerges from such a war as technical victor, it will probably be unable to build up the machine civilization anew. The world, therefore, will once again be inhabited by a few million, or a few hundred million human beings living by subsistence agriculture, and probably, after a couple of generations, retaining no more of the culture of the past than a knowledge of how to smelt metals. Conceivably this is a desirable outcome, but obviously it has nothing to do with Socialism.

3. That the fear inspired by the atomic bomb and other weapons yet to come will be so great that everyone will refrain from using them. This seems to me the worst possibility of all. It would mean the division of the world among two or three vast super-states, unable to conquer one another and unable to be overthrown by any internal rebellion. In all probability their structure would be hierarchic, with a semi-divine caste at the top and outright slavery at the bottom, and the crushing out of liberty would exceed anything that the world has yet seen. Within each state the necessary psychological atmosphere would be kept up by complete severance from the outer world, and by a continuous phony war against rival states. Civilizations of this type might remain static for thousands of years.

Most of the dangers that I have outlined existed and were foreseeable long before the atomic bomb was invented. The only way of avoiding them that I can imagine is to present somewhere or other, on a large scale, the spectacle of a community where people are relatively free and happy and where the main motive in life is not the pursuit of money or power. In other words, democratic Socialism must be made to work throughout some large area. But the only area in which it could conceivably be made to work, in any near future, is Western Europe. Apart from Australia and New Zealand, the tradition of democratic Socialism can only be said to exist

— even there it only exists precariously — in Scandinavia, Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, the Low Countries, France, Britain, Spain, and Italy.

Only in those countries are there still large numbers of people to whom the word 'Socialism' has some appeal, and for whom it is bound up with liberty, equality, and internationalism. Elsewhere it either has no foothold or it means something different. In North America the masses are contented with capitalism, and one cannot tell what turn they will take when capitalism begins to collapse. In the U.S.S.R. there prevails a sort of oligarchical collectivism which could only develop into democratic Socialism against the will of the ruling minority. Into Asia even the word 'Socialism' has barely penetrated. The Asiatic nationalist movements are either Fascist in character, or look towards Moscow, or manage to combine both attitudes: and at present all movements among the coloured peoples are tinged by racial mysticism. In most of South America the position is essentially similar, so is it in Africa and the Middle East. Socialism does not exist anywhere, but even as an idea it is at present valid only in Europe.

Of course, Socialism cannot properly be said to be established until it is world-wide, but the process must begin somewhere, and I cannot imagine it beginning except through the federation of the western European states, transformed into Socialist republics without colonial dependencies. Therefore a Socialist United States of Europe seems to me the only worth-while political objective today. Such a federation would contain about 250 million people, including perhaps half the skilled industrial workers of the world. I do not need to be told that the difficulties of bringing any such thing into being are enormous and terrifying, and I will list some of them in a moment. But we ought not to feel that it is of its nature impossible, or that countries so different from one another would not voluntarily unite. A western European union is in itself a less improbable concatenation than the Soviet Union or the British Empire.

Now as to the difficulties. The greatest difficulty of all is the apathy and conservatism of people everywhere, their unawareness of danger, their inability to imagine anything new — in general, as Bertrand Russell put it recently, the unwillingness of the human race to acquiesce in its own survival. But there are also active malignant forces working against European unity, and there are existing economic relationships on which the European peoples depend for their standard of life and which are not compatible with true Socialism. I list what seem to me to be the four main obstacles, explaining each of them as shortly as I can manage:

1. Russian hostility. The Russians cannot but be hostile to any European union not under their own control. The reasons, both the pretended and the real ones, are obvious. One has to count, therefore, with the danger of a preventive war, with the systematic terrorizing of the smaller nations, and with the sabotage of the Communist Parties everywhere. Above all there is the danger that the European masses will continue to believe in the Russian myth. As long as they believe it, the idea of a Socialist Europe will not be sufficiently magnetic to call forth the necessary effort.

2. American hostility. If the United States remains capitalist, and especially if it needs markets for exports, it cannot regard a Socialist Europe with a friendly eye. No doubt it is less likely than the U.S.S.R. to intervene with brute force, but American pressure is an important factor because it can be exerted most easily on Britain, the one country

in Europe which is outside the Russian orbit. Since 1940 Britain has kept its feet against the European dictators at the expense of becoming almost a dependency of the U.S.A. Indeed, Britain can only get free of America by dropping the attempt to be an extra-European power. The English-speaking Dominions, the colonial dependencies, except perhaps in Africa, and even Britain's supplies of oil, are all hostages in American hands. Therefore there is always the danger that the United States will break up any European coalition by drawing Britain out of it.

3. Imperialism. The European peoples, and especially the British, have long owed their high standard of life to direct or indirect exploitation of the coloured peoples. This relationship has never been made clear by official Socialist propaganda, and the British worker, instead of being told that, by world standards, he is living above his income, has been taught to think of himself as an overworked, down-trodden slave. To the masses everywhere 'Socialism' means, or at least is associated with, higher wages, shorter hours, better houses, all-round social insurance, etc. etc. But it is by no means certain that we can afford these things if we throw away the advantages we derive from colonial exploitation. However evenly the national income is divided up, if the income as a whole falls, the working-class standard of living must fall with it. At best there is liable to be a long and uncomfortable reconstruction period for which public opinion has nowhere been prepared. But at the same time the European nations must stop being exploiters abroad if they are to build true Socialism at home. The first step toward a European Socialist federation is for the British to get out of India. But this entails something else. If the United States of Europe is to be self-sufficient and able to hold its own against Russia and America, it must include Africa and the Middle East. But that means that the position of the indigenous peoples in those countries must be changed out of recognition – that Morocco or Nigeria or Abyssinia must cease to be colonies or semi-colonies and become autonomous republics on a complete equality with the European peoples. This entails a vast change of outlook and a bitter, complex struggle which is not likely to be settled without bloodshed. When the pinch comes the forces of imperialism will turn out to be extremely strong, and the British worker, if he has been taught to think of Socialism in materialistic terms, may ultimately decide that it is better to remain an imperial power at the expense of playing second fiddle to America. In varying degrees all the European peoples, at any rate those who are to form part of the proposed union, will be faced with the same choice.

4. The Catholic Church. As the struggle between East and West becomes more naked, there is danger that democratic Socialists and mere reactionaries will be driven into combining in a sort of Popular Front. The Church is the likeliest bridge between them. In any case the Church will make every effort to capture and sterilize any movement aiming at European unity. The dangerous thing about the Church is that it is not reactionary in the ordinary sense. It is not tied to laissez-faire capitalism or to the existing class system, and will not necessarily perish with them. It is perfectly capable of coming to terms with Socialism, or appearing to do so, provided that its own position is safeguarded. But if it is allowed to survive as a powerful organization, it will make the establishment of true Socialism impossible, because its influence is and always must be against freedom of thought and speech, against human equality, and against any form of society tending to promote earthly happiness.

When I think of these and other difficulties, when I think of the enormous mental readjustment that would have to be made, the appearance

of a Socialist United States of Europe seems to me a very unlikely event. I don't mean that the bulk of the people are not prepared for it, in a passive way. I mean that I see no person or group of persons with the slightest chance of attaining power and at the same time with the imaginative grasp to see what is needed and to demand the necessary sacrifices from their followers. But I also can't at present see any other hopeful objective. At one time I believed that it might be possible to form the British Empire into a federation of Socialist republics, but if that chance ever existed, we lost it by failing to liberate India, and by our attitude toward the coloured peoples generally. It may be that Europe is finished and that in the long run some better form of society will arise in India or China. But I believe that it is only in Europe, if anywhere, that democratic Socialism could be made a reality in short enough time to prevent the dropping of the atom bombs.

Of course, there are reasons, if not for optimism, at least for suspending judgement on certain points. One thing in our favour is that a major war is not likely to happen immediately. We could, I suppose, have the kind of war that consists in shooting rockets, but not a war involving the mobilization of tens of millions of men. At present any large army would simply melt away, and that may remain true for ten or even twenty years. Within that time some unexpected things might happen. For example, a powerful Socialist movement might for the first time arise in the United States as 'capitalistic', with the implication that this is something unalterable, a sort of racial characteristic like the colour of eyes or hair. But in fact it cannot be unalterable, since capitalism itself has manifestly no future, and we cannot be sure in advance that the next change in the United States will not be a change for the better.

Then, again, we do not know what changes will take place in the U.S.S.R. if war can be staved off for the next generation or so. In a society of that type, a radical change of outlook always seems unlikely, not only because there can be no open opposition but because the régime, with its complete hold over education, news, etc. deliberately aims at preventing the pendulum swing between generations which seems to occur naturally in liberal societies. But for all we know the tendency one generation to reject the ideas of the last is an abiding human characteristic which even the N.K.V.D. will be unable to eradicate. In that case there may by 1960 be millions of young Russians who are bored by dictatorship and loyalty parades, eager for more freedom, and friendly in their attitude towards the West.

Or again, it is even possible that if the world falls apart into three unconquerable super-states, the liberal tradition will be strong enough within the Anglo-American section of the world to make life tolerable and even offer some hope of progress. But all this is speculation. The actual outlook, so far as I can calculate the probabilities, is very dark, and any serious thought should start out from that fact.

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