

THE HOWARD FAST DISCUSSION

Jack Lindsay

London

THE DISTANCES we have traversed this last year seem to me summed up in the fact that I find it necessary to explain the reasons why I don't cease to be a Communist. The whole question of conscience I felt sharply raised afresh on reading Howard Fast's essay "My Decision," in the March *Mainstream*. What I am writing here is in a sense a reply to it, but not a combative retort; rather the continuing of a conversation.

To the emotions that stir Fast I have only a comradely salute. Anyone who does not feel in general the same sort of thing is outside the argument. We all know those who remark, "Very sad and bad. Well, that's agreed and settled, now let's get on to the next business, something practical." Such are self-condemned; they have felt nothing. But after we have looked the worst in the eye we have still to make some sense out of life or give up the ghost. I think we can make sense in a slightly different way than Fast has.

We can now begin, I think, to grasp concretely what happened in Russia, why and how it happened. (How remote the Soviets still are from our conceptions of democracy was well brought out in a recent article in *The Anglo-Soviet Journal*: a Soviet defender of the one-candidate election, pushed into a corner, argued (a) if there were more than one candidate, the people would be misled by demagogues etc. (b) only the fellow-bureaucrats were in a position to know the qualities of the various names considered. How Victorian Tories would have cheered!) An historical comprehension is necessary; otherwise an unhealed emotional bitterness remains. But such a comprehension, however much it explains, does not excuse the bad things; and it is in fact obstructive unless directed towards seeing that such things are ended and given no chance to re-sprout. We can weather a lot of shocks indeed, if we feel that a sustained and effective effort is being made to remedy evils and prevent recurrences; we lose heart only if we see no such effort.

Mainstream's editors in their "Comment" pointed to many ways in which amends have been made and forward movements commenced. All that is true, and more might yet be said on the same lines. But I do not think we can meet Fast's case simply in that way. For me as a Marxist the main shock of the 1956 events lay, not simply in the revelation that many horrible and inhuman things had happened and were still happening in the name of socialism, but rather in

the exposure of the abysmal failure of Marxist consciousness, of the unity of theory and practice, which had made the crimes possible. Unless we are confident that the failure in Marxism has been understood and grappled with, we cannot feel any assurance that "such things cannot happen again." And indeed the fact that after the 20th Congress there could still remain so much that was reprehensible in Soviet foreign relations, brought dramatically out by the events in Poland and Hungary, was the plain underlining of this point.

In a sense one knows now only too well that things could not have been otherwise. The bureaucratic distortion of socialism, which was the dark side of Stalinism, reduced Marxism to a brutish dialectics concerned only with the head-on collision of opposites and thus drained humanism from socialist practice. Marxism was the first victim, as it must be in a socialist society which in any serious way takes a wrong turning. (I am putting these points crudely; a more balanced working-out will be found in Maurice Cornforth's essay in the last issue of *The Marxist Quarterly*, in which he briefly but clearly shows how Stalinism went wrong on the conceptions of intensified class-struggle inside socialist society, of increasing "war-inevitability" from imperialism as socialism triumphed, of hardening state-forms.) The problem of reviving Marxism is perhaps the most difficult problem that the U.S.S.R. faces today; for the scholastic rationalizations, the vulgarized Zhdanovist forms, which supplanted Marxism, will need a lot of shifting, and so far have only shown signs of strain, not of disappearance.

IN SUCH a situation, the denunciation of the dark side of Stalinism could only be made in shallow non-Marxist terms. The phrase "cult of the individual" is so grotesque as an explanation of the distortions that one is at a loss to characterize it. We have always satirized bourgeois thought for picking out subjective or peripheral aspects of a phenomenon as the cause of it; and here we have that evasive futility in a sort of parodied form. But the issues it raises are too serious to provoke a laugh. It crystallizes all that one feels and sees of the breakdown of Marxism.

Not that the weaknesses it reveals are solely the property of the U.S.S.R. In all communist parties the epoch through which we have passed has left its dangerous marks. In Britain we have continued, I think I may claim, to build up a body of Marxist thought that is not to be despised; but at the same time one can see, in the sharpened light of the new focus, how many of the rigid and mechanist aspects of the later Stalinist attitudes have impeded, limited and distorted various elements of our thinking, our policy. And the job of changing all this, of releasing in its full dynamic purity the Marxist method—with all that implies in thought and action—is not going to be an easy one, in Britain or anywhere else.

Here, however, is the point at which I break with the formulations of Fast. Even if things were worse, I should still have faith in Marxism and in the people; and however many discontents I had with the existing forms and expressions of my party, I should still believe that it was needed, that it must grow, throw off its backward-looking restraints and distortions, and get in step with the people, at the same time helping to quicken the pace of the movement into a full freedom and happiness. I should still believe that there can, and will, and must be a

harmony recreated between the struggle of the people for a fuller life and the development of Marxism as the science of the life-process. For good and bad, the fates of Marxism and of the Communist Parties are entwined. (I do not mean that contributions cannot be made by non-party individuals, but that the coherent drive of the party cannot be dispensed with.) I for one cannot see except in a day-dream the advent of new parties with the pure milk of Marxism or with some sufficient surrogate; and without Marxism I cannot see the world stably advancing.

By Marxism I mean the consciousness of method, of reality, which is necessary for the creation of a world-society, for human unity—the philosophy which has been historically founded by Marx, Engels and Lenin, and decisively developed by them, however many limitations there may be in their work with its historically conditioned aims, questions, and answers.

Therefore, however personally shattered, I cannot separate my existence, the very integument of my personality, from the life of the Communist Parties, from the life of Marxism in both its national and international aspects. We need, all of us, to think out afresh the situation in which we find ourselves, the nature of capitalist crisis, the changes going on in the socialist sector which has emerged as an unshakable world-factor, and in the capitalist sector that faces such a development. I for one consider that the forms of social change which we shall see will have very little analogy in past forms; and that the ways in which highly advanced industrialist countries are going to move forward are ways we have not foreseen and have still very little understanding of. But in such a difficult and obscure moment, Marxism is not proved unnecessary. The dead forms may give scanty help; all the more need to revive the living method again.

THERE are many points I could make in this relation. I will touch only on what seems to me the essential one. Marxism, with its struggle for the unity of theory and practice is in essence a way of thinking which implies a world-society of brotherhood and peace and plenty. Because of this, it becomes the instrument for making such a world possible, bringing it about. At every step then before the attainment of such a society, it has to fight like grim death to save itself from being swallowed up, distorted, broken down by the world of halfmen, self-divided men, which it seeks to transform. It keeps before itself the idea, the dream, of human unity, and redeems this from abstraction by the ceaseless struggle to actualize it. There is thus the contradiction all the while that Marxism with its concept of the unity of the life-process is striving to affirm itself in a world where that process has been fissured, cracked, distorted and inverted in endless ways; its ideal of the all-round man, the whole man, cannot be realized in such a situation and yet Marxists must seek to act and think as such a man. To bring about the stable and universal development of the all-round man, we need the ending of commodity-production; for as Marx pointed out as one of his basic ideas, while commodity-production remains, commodity-fetichism also remains, the ceaseless pressure to reduce men to things. We may now add, in view of the new focus, the new actual experience of the problems of socialism, that commodity-production in its spiritual effects would not be automatically ended even by an achievement of

plenty. *The division of labor* is an essential aspect of the divisive thingifying process; and the ending of commodity-production in the sense of bringing about communist production must involve the ending of the division of labor and the universal appearance of the all-round man, the whole man. With the advent of automation, atomic energy and the rest of it, we can now visualize such a development without utopian fantasy.

What is our job meanwhile? To struggle for socialism on the political and economic fronts, yes, but also to grasp as fully as possible what has happened to the fragmented man of class-society in the period of mass-production, labor-division at its highest level of expansion. Only thus can we also grasp what is carried over into socialism, not merely as the obvious "bourgeois survivals" which have been the easily shot down game of the socialist writer, but as the deep hard core of self-division, self-alienation, which distorts the very socialist process of building plenty by founding it on the instabilities, fears greeds, alienations of the thingified man. The first work from a socialist country that shows an awareness of this issue is Dudintsev's *Not By Bread Alone*,* and the attacks it has provoked are a measure of the entrenched social and psychological forces in socialism which will resent and resist any such development of the essential Marxist concept of alienation.

Along such lines we can defeat the narrow and schematic views of art as a superficial educative process, which have dominated in the socialist world—and still dominate. To know what forms a man, in our world, we need also to know what has deformed him; and without undervaluing the elements of release and regeneration which are present in even the most hidebound of socialisms, we must also not undervalue the terrible grip of fear, stupefaction, inner division and alienation, which is an inescapable heritage from the past.

If we glance again at the formulations of Zhdanov, we find them riddled with the most undialectical preconceptions. Art is not seen as a dialogue between artist and people, but as something supplied on demand to the people, who, by the mere fact of a socialist economy, are supposed to have become perfectly aware of the nature of art and what they want from it. This fallacious notion of a spontaneous art-awareness in the people works out, not as letting them ask for and get what they want, but as defining authoritatively and dogmatically from above what they are to be given. In practice, it is most intensely suspicious of what is wanted. The result is that the living give-and-take between artist and people, which alone can restore health to the situation, is ruled out, and a phoney idea of spontaneity veils the facts of arbitrary control.

In the same way the fantasy-picture of the party as the pure monolithic expression of mass-will works out as the party becoming bureaucratic and authoritarian. The dialogue of the party and the people needs to become fuller, freer, more open in every way. We must see the party, not as a simple monolithic structure, but as a form concentrating social consciousness and therefore also concentrating social struggle inside and outside it. This conception leads to a new view of the nature of inner-party discussion and democracy, and breaks down the Chinese-wall between party and people—a wall which must exist while old rules of democratic

* See discussion of Dudintsev by Ralph Parker in this issue.

centralism are narrowly and unimaginatively clung-to under the panic belief that any relaxation, any direct linking of inner-party discussions and disagreements with the people, must lead to factionalist disintegration. And so on.

THE formulations I have made are concise and rough, but I do not think they need lead to misunderstanding on the part of anyone who approaches them with reasonable goodwill. I am aware that they are no more than generalized hints as to the new ways we need, but I think they are capable of being worked out and applied in immediately useful ways. I do not see any organization save that of my party in which such ideas can get an effective hearing and testing. Even those of us who thought we had some understanding of the complexity of the problem of creating a true socialist community have been shaken by the enormous extension of the perspective, the first real grasp of the long-distance nature of the problem in all its ramifications. Perhaps the last utopia has gone. A certain dreariness seems to settle on the mind as one estimates the spiritual Saharas, the dead weight of alienation, that we take with us into socialism; but once we get a firm grip on the issue, I think the sense of hope, exhilaration, joy can return. I feel a few glimmerings of a new liberation. It is according to the thoroughness and depth with which we now grapple with the issues, that we can shorten the period in which socialism keeps on getting built with a largely-bourgeois consciousness ("Marxism" abstractly imposed thereon); that we can really begin the withering of that poison-bloom, the State; that we can speed up the consciousness of life in all its rich wholeness and develop the whole man. Not easy matters. But surely now we begin to know the inner enemy in all his subtle variations, and can effectively challenge the distortions of Marxism. All that is great gain. And, even if we blink at moments before the Herculean tasks of changing the world and ourselves, changing our party too as part of all that, it can be done. Let us keep before us an awareness of the way in which Marxism was born, what it signifies in the freedom of mankind, and the historical forms through which it can alone be adequately developed. I remain a Communist.

Walter Lowenfels

Dear Howard:

I thought from what you told me over the telephone a few weeks ago that you had gone through a soul-shattering experience. Now I find from your *Mainstream* article that you are very much the same person.

We are going through one of those geological epochs in human history where new mountains are thrown up and old river beds flooded. Nobody will emerge as they were. Some of us will not survive at all. Those of us who come through the great upheaval will never be the same. But you, my friend, act as if you were the same.

Where are your wound stripes? Your torn and battered uniform? Your badge in the fight for the clean word? Where is your eye-witness report on the effect of the Stalin Era on the development of character and personality in all our writing, not excluding your own?

I expected a battlescarred front line dispatch from you. Instead, you give us a "political report on the Russian situation." What I was expecting was not your farewell to Russia but your salute to the people of the U.S.A.

Somehow you began to act in the working class movement—"the movement"—remember?) more as a "politician" rather than as an artist. It wasn't all your fault. After all we cannot all be like Mao Tse Tung, both poets and politicians. In your case, I and others are not without blame. But you, too, bear your share of the responsibility.

Now you have given up the Party—but you haven't given up your role as "politician." Only now you are a "politician" outside the movement, not inside it. "Politician" is in quotes because I do not grant any barrier between art and politics.

As a non-Communist politician, I hope you can remain inside a general area of agreement with me about a better USA for all. But outside that, how can I help but see you as a one-armed politician—the kind, both in and out of the party, who keep their art in one hand, their politics in another?

I am not going to discuss the items in your political report. "I also am not on a bed of roses," said the Aztec Cuauhtemoc to a lieutenant groaning at his side, as the Spanish Conquistadores were toasting their feet.

The decision you now face is, in my mind, more serious than your letter indicates. Are you going to join a monastery? Are you giving up your way of life? What are you actually doing in the flesh to keep your spirit alive?

You appear to be ready, with some grimace of anguish, to continue right along with all the comforts that Itzik Feffer and the others had to give up. What concerns me is not that your notice of resignation appeared in the *NY Times*, but my fear that you may be accepting the *Times* view of what is news. Is it really news when somebody quits the CPUSA of some 20,000 members and joins the non-Communist Party population of some 180 million?

You may ask what position I have taken in the controversy that is shaking the Communist movement in the USA and throughout the world. My position is clear: I am for more poetry, more dancing, more singing. I am also interested in a revolution worth winning.

By "poetry" I don't have in mind just some lines of verse, although that is not excluded. What the word, poem, does today is a small thing—but a larger one is implied. It is one effort, along with all our other efforts, to identify and integrate the dignity of human personality against the world's terrific freight.

"Do you expect to live forever? That's the essence of poetry," William Carlos Williams wrote the other day.

Some of my best friends are, in my opinion, wrong on this issue. They act as if words were only to be used to get something done. It is known throughout history and throughout the world—including vast populations among the Indians of the Western hemisphere—that words also have another quite different function:

as instruments of "transport," as well as of persuasion, *to move as well as to convince*.

In songs and poems, words are used for incantation, to take you out of this world and put you into communication with the "friend of the soul of man," as our Indian forbears said, that is, with the essence of things.

I am hoping that you will see that it isn't enough today just to be against the capitalist system. The experience of the industrialization of the Soviet Union convinces me more than ever that we have to oppose the abstract mechanized concept of the world that has gripped Western civilization for the past 200 years. I am not for returning to the soil, breaking the machines. I am in favor of dominating the machines via socialism, so that through them and with them we can go about the main business of living—socially and creatively.

Furthermore, I am not interested much in arguing about my view as theory. I have no doubt many can knock it down with a better theory. My main thesis is—what can I do about it? and what can others do? You still say you want to change the world? How can we change the world unless we change ourselves?

How, for example, can we help the labor movement to become a singing movement charged with enthusiasm and youth? (Truth, Marx observed, consists not only in its end result but in the way it was reached.) Can't we show people by what we do that socialism can be a singing thing; that it need not make robots of people! Isn't it the capitalist system that robs them of personality,—of humanity, makes them slaves to bread and bread alone, takes away the song of life and gives them instead a jingle telling them the bread is vitamin-enriched?

What some of us are in danger of losing in modern society is the blues, the real blues, that sense of what used to be called "the tragic joy of being alive."

Our contact with Mother Earth threatens to be nothing but the grave, threatens to leave us her orphans rather than her children. We are in danger each instant of being engulfed in the cynicism, despair, and violence that capitalist machine-culture beats into our ears and eyes night and day.

As for crimes committed in the course of building socialism—crimes against poets, too, as well as against millions of others—what is an exception under socialism, part of its birth pangs, is the rule under capitalism during its dying agonies.

A way of life has been established under the profit system. It demands along with exploitation of "inferior people" a letting of blood every so often that has destroyed hundreds of millions of lives during the past half century alone. War, not peace, seems to be the apex of capitalist culture. Its most miraculous mechanisms reach their most beautiful perfection in the H-bomb. I am stressing this dominant tone which offers one blinding resolution to all its idiocies—atomic devastation. That is one reason I say elsewhere that peace—respect for the rights of others—peace itself is the poem of our time.

One of Walt Whitman's central themes is the responsibility of the modern poet to become permeated with a sense of good health and to spread it. Can't we work together to build a society where the suicide rate goes down in the spring, reversing the contemporary trend where the number of suicides rises as the trees begin to bloom? I am hoping, Howard, that you will see that the goal of life isn't socialism, but that the goal of socialism is to live.