The socialist myth

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It is widely believed that the radicalism of the late 1960's is over. Those who identified with it regret its passing (not least, one supposes, because with it seems to have passed so much of their youth); others are consoled and reassured. But both are mistaken. The more tumultuous manifestations of that period have indeed become rarer—but primarily because so many of the radical impulses of 10 years ago have now become firmly institutionalized. To be sure, the rhetorical goals of the "revolution" have not been achieved; the goals of revolutionary rhetoric are never achieved. Yet the "revolution" has succeeded beyond its wildest expectations in the social milieu that, from the beginning, provided both its place of origin and its principal audience—the milieu of the intellectuals, of the cultural elite.

This success has been spectacular in Western Europe, where various forms of gauchisme are culturally dominant—in some countries to the point of a near monopoly. This dominance is not just a matter of intellectual climate or mood; it is exercised through job networks and career channels, through the control of institutions in education, publishing, the media, and the general "culture business." The aftereffects of the late 1960's are somewhat less dramatic in the United States. Yet here, on the cultural scene, there has also been a massive shift to the left, which has found
a variety of institutional expressions, many of them of great political relevance. Domestic politics continues to be dominated by egalitarian, redistributionist, and liberationist ideas and programs conceived in the late 1960's. Foreign policy is undergoing a convulsive and possibly permanent change as a result of one of the major radical formulations of the late 1960's—the proposition that American world power is immoral and ought therefore to be curtailed, if not dismantled. Most important, within the intellectual milieu there has been a far-reaching delegitimation of some of the key institutions and values of American society: There is a broad, probably growing consensus to the effect that the market economy is intrinsically evil, that the culture of the mass of the American people (“Middle America”) is inferior and pathological, and most ominously of all, that the political system of liberal democracy is a corrupt sham.

This body of political and cultural attitudes is not new. It represents merely the latest eruption of a powerful, deeply running current within Western civilization that goes back at least to the early 19th century. This particular eruption, however, comes at a critical moment in world affairs and may have decisive consequences for a very long time to come. For this reason, an understanding of the peculiar affinity of intellectuals for such beliefs is very far from merely an abstract academic concern. It is timely, politically significant, even urgent.

**Intellectuals and the “left”**

*Le coeur est à la gauche.* As a tendency, at the very least, this has been true of intellectuals for a long time. To understand why, it helps to ask two questions: What does the “left” mean in this context? And who are the “intellectuals”? Both terms, needless to say, have been the subject of endless definitions and redefinitions. Yet, when all is said and done, the terms refer to empirical phenomena that are readily available and, much of the time, fairly clear. If the “left” is often fractioned and shifting along its outer boundaries, it is always definable in terms of what it opposes—the socioeconomic system of capitalism and its historical correlate, the culture of the bourgeoisie. Whatever else it may mean, to be “on the left” is to be antagonistic to capitalism and to bourgeois culture. Put positively, to be “on the left” is to participate, in whatever manner and to whatever degree, in one of the great myths of modern history—the myth of socialism. As for the “intellectuals,”
it will suffice to describe them as that social stratum whose principal activity is the production and distribution of ideas. One of the important processes of the 20th century has been the vast increase in the population of this stratum, a development resulting from the growth of what Fritz Machlup has called the "knowledge industry." Daniel Bell has persuasively argued that this development is one of the constitutive features of contemporary Western society.

There have been intellectuals with no tendency toward socialism, as there have been nonintellectual socialists. The affinity between intellectuals and the socialist myth is nevertheless one of long standing, and the recent population explosion of the intellectual stratum has intensified that relationship—an interesting phenomenon in itself, which also suggests that the reasons for the attraction are unlikely to be superficial. Now, the simplest explanation for the affinity (and the one most congenial to those who are "on the left" themselves) would be that socialism just happens to be the only rational conclusion for an informed understanding of the modern world. Thus the increased attraction of socialism could be directly attributed to the spread of the relevant information and insight in an increasingly literate and educated population.

But this explanation will not do. Even if it were true that socialism is the only rational conclusion, this would not explain its dissemination among specific social groups. Modern science, for example, may also be described as the only rational conclusion for certain questions about nature—and yet it took millennia before it came to be established in specific groups in a specific corner of the world. Ideas neither triumph nor fail in history because of their intrinsic truth or falsity. Furthermore, the affinity between intellectuals and socialism is very clearly more than a matter of rational arguments. It is suffused with values, with moral passion, in many cases with profoundly religious hope—in sum, with precisely those characteristics which permit speaking of a socialist myth (needless to say, in a descriptive, nonpejorative sense).

The affinity between intellectuals and the left has been noted many times, and there have been various attempts to explain it. Most of the explanations have been in terms of the vested group interests and/or psychological propensities of intellectuals. Vilfredo Pareto viewed socialism as but another rationalization of what he termed "spoliation"—the process by which one group seeks to plunder another; in this view, the intellectuals identifying with socialist movements are simply trying to join what they (rightly
or wrongly) believe to be the future elite, and their ideology is nothing but a smokescreen for their ambition. Joseph Schumpeter sought the clue to the affinity in the material interest that intellectuals as a group have in the expansion of the modern "tax state"; put simply, intellectuals prefer socialism, and all steps in the direction of socialism, because they expect a socialist system to provide them with a more satisfactory subsidization than a market economy (the likelihood that they are mistaken in this assessment does not invalidate the argument). F.A. Hayek, on the other hand, offered an explanation in terms of the intellectuals' propensity for abstract speculation; socialism seduces less by the riches it promises than by the neatness of its theoretical constructions, its apparent rationality. Bertrand de Jouvenel approached the question along similar lines, and the same interpretation underlies David Caute's treatment of the long flirtation of Western intellectuals with the Soviet Union, which he calls a "postscript to the Enlightenment."

There have been comparable analyses of the leftward shift on the intellectual scene since the late 1960's. Irving Kristol has persuasively argued that there is a kind of class struggle in America today between the intellectuals (now a bloated group numbering in the millions) and the business elite; as always, this class struggle is over privilege and power. Raymond Aron and Helmut Schelsky have interpreted the leftward tendency of Western European intellectuals in essentially similar ways. Daniel Bell, in his most recent work, has ingeniously combined an analysis of class interests with Lionel Trilling's conception of the "adversary culture": Capitalism suffers from a profound contradiction between the rationale of its technoeconomic structure and the cultural ethos of liberationism brought about by the very success of that structure.

**The costs of modernization**

Clearly, intellectuals have vested interests like any other social group (leaving aside the question as to whether intellectuals can actually be called a "class"), and it is inconceivable that such interests should not enter into their ideological preferences. It is also plausible that the psychological traits associated with their role as society's full-time theorizers should influence their perceptions of the world. What must be added to the foregoing, however, is a closer look at the mythic qualities of socialism. Put differently: Specific characteristics of the socialist myth have a bearing on the specific affinity between it and Western intellectuals.
Much has been written, at least from Georges Sorel on, about the mythic quality of socialism. One important element should be added to this line of interpretation: The socialist myth derives much of its power from its unique capacity to synthetize modernizing and counter-modernizing themes. Modernization—its ideas, values, aspirations—continues to be the dominant theme of our time, and it is fully integrated into all the various versions of socialism. The socialist program is based on all the standard cognitive assumptions of modernity—history as progress (an idea which must be understood as a secularization of Biblical eschatology), the perfectibility of man, scientific reason as the great liberator from illusion, and man's ability to overcome all or nearly all of his afflictions by taking rational control of his destiny. In these assumptions, socialism—like liberalism—is the child of the Enlightenment. Unlike liberalism, however, socialism has also successfully incorporated the themes that have arisen in protest of the discontents of modernity—notably the theme of renewed community. Both liberalism and socialism have upheld the threefold promise of the French Revolution—of liberty, equality, and fraternity (although they have very different definitions for these terms). But liberalism has rarely had much to say about fraternity; socialism, by contrast, has made this one of its most inspiring ambitions.

Modernity is brought about only at great costs, costs exacted at the time of its inception in Europe, and continuing to be exacted today. The forces of modernization bring on massive material sacrifices and dislocations, from the destruction of English village life in the past to remarkably similar cataclysms in the Third World today. There are large numbers of people who suddenly lose their traditional livelihood and are plunged into acute misery, large migrations of people under conditions of great deprivation, and even mass hunger and virulent new epidemics. But what is more, economic and social dislocations of such magnitude frequently necessitate a quantum jump in the repressive measures of the political order. This aspect of modernization is apparent from the notorious "black codes" of 18th-century England (which, among other innovations, enormously increased the number of offenses, compared to medieval common law, that were punishable under the death penalty) to the luxuriant growth of repressive regimes in the contemporary Third World. But there are also subtler, though by no means less important, costs of modernization. Most of these relate directly or indirectly to the loss of community.

Through most of human history, most human beings have lived
in small social settings marked by a plenitude of ongoing face-to-face contacts and by intense solidarity and moral consensus. It would be quite false to idealize this condition. It was by no means characterized at all times by general happiness; it included every variety of suffering and oppression. But one kind of suffering that it almost never included was what moderns have come to know as alienation, or anomie. Community was real and all-embracing, for better or for worse. The individual was thus rarely, if ever, thrown back upon himself. There were few, if any, uncertainties about the basic cognitive and moral framework of life, hardly any crises of meaning, practically no crises of identity. Individuals knew their world, and they knew who they were. Institutional order, collective meanings, and individual identity were firmly and reliably integrated in the sacred order provided by religious tradition. Human beings were at home in reality—even if, perhaps especially if, this home was often a less than satisfactory place.

Modernity, by contrast, is marked by homelessness. The forces of modernization have descended like a gigantic steel hammer upon all the old communal institutions—clan, village, tribe, region—distorting or greatly weakening them, if not destroying them altogether. The capitalist market economy, the centralized bureaucratic state, the new technology let loose by industrialism, the consequent rapid population growth and urbanization, and finally the mass media of communication—these modernizing forces have caused havoc to all the social and cultural formations in which human beings used to be at home, creating a radically new context for human life. It is hardly surprising that this transformation caused severe discontents, giving birth to counter-modernizing impulses that consistently expressed themselves in movements that invoked the old solidarities, from the Fronde in the 17th century to the latest “nativisms” of the contemporary Third World. Even where there were no organized movements, there was a sense of longing for the restoration of community, for redemption from the alienating power of modernity.

In its political manifestations, counter-modernization is usually perceived as backward-looking, as “reactionary.” This perception is often adequate, but is important to see that it can also be forward-looking, “progressive”—whenever the longed-for community is located in the future rather than the past. There are religious prototypes (Jewish as well as Christian) for either type of antimodern sentiment. Socialism is the secular prototype par excellence of pro-
jecting the redemptive community into the future. The genius of socialism, though, is that its secularized eschatology incorporates in addition the central aspirations of modernity—a new rational order, the abolition of material want and social inequality, and the complete liberation of the individual. Socialism, in other words, promises all the blessings of modernity and the liquidation of its costs, including, most importantly, the cost of alienation. To grasp this essentially simple fact about the socialist myth and to recall at the same time that modern secularism has greatly weakened the plausibility of competing religious eschatologies is to remove the mystery of the magnetic appeal of socialism. Indeed, if any mystery remains, it is that socialism has not yet triumphed completely.

“Scientific” socialism

Marxism has been the most comprehensive intellectual formulation (or, if one prefers, legitimation) of the socialist myth. The decisive clue to its tenacious hold on the imagination of large numbers of people is precisely its claim, from the beginning, to be scientific socialism. The act of mythological synthesis, so to speak, was accomplished at the very moment when Marx turned the fire of his messianic hope on the dry bones of Manchester economics. To be able to retain all the redemptive expectations of socialism, and to do so on the basis of a “scientific” theory (the more difficult, the better!)—that is the central clue to the seductiveness of the Marxist message. Marxism, of course, has separated into different sects (in that, too, it stands in apostolic succession to Judaeo-Christian messianism), and the synthesis has taken correspondingly different forms. A history of Marxism in terms of the permutations of the two components of the socialist myth—the modernizing and the counter-modernizing impulses—remains to be written. Some branches of Marxism have submerged the messianic component in a pedantic “scientism,” others have gone the opposite route. It is safe to say, though, that wherever Marxism has maintained a wide appeal, it has sought to keep the two themes in some sort of balance. Put differently, in the face of the dislocations and discontents of modernity, Marxism has always held out the promise that people may eat their cake and have it, too.

Thus the view of Marxism as an offspring of the Enlightenment is as one-sided as the contrary view of it as nothing but a quasi-religion. It is both, and in this duality lies its enduring appeal. The socialist myth promises the fulfilment of both the rational
dreams of the Enlightenment and the manifold aspirations of those to whom the Enlightenment has been an alienating experience. Such a promise inevitably grates against its imperfect realization in empirical reality, frustrating and often enraging its believers. Needless to say, this is nothing new in the long history of eschatologies, which is, inevitably, a history of the psychology of disappointment. It is all the more important to understand that, given the inherent plausibility of the mythic vision, no amount of empirical disappointments can conclusively invalidate it. Myths are falsification-proof. After all, the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth expected his return in glory within their own lifetimes; Christians are still waiting, despite what Protestant theologians have so nicely called the \textit{Parousieverzoegerung} (freely translated, the slight delay in the Second Coming). The socialist \textit{parousia}, too, has been delayed; claimants to that status have so far been a big disappointment. Socialists are still waiting, though, even if they feel compelled by the empirical evidence to shift the direction of their eschatological anticipation from time to time.

The Soviet Union, of course, has been a major disappointment to many, and the psychological drama of the resulting ambivalences, denials of reality, and ideological reconstructions has been very fully documented. All the same, keeping in mind the peculiar synthesis of modernizing and counter-modernizing impulses in the socialist myth, the Soviet Union has realized its promise in instructive, if somewhat surprising, ways. It was Lenin who, in 1920, characterized Communism as "Soviet power plus electrification"; and 50 years later, Russian reality could be described as "Middle Ages plus intercontinental missiles" (and it is not irrelevant that the counter-modern imagination has repeatedly invoked medieval imagery—as indeed did Marx, in his few lyrical descriptions of life after the socialist revolution). A very short list of these medievalisms will have to suffice here: the restoration of the essentially feudalistic merger of political and economic institutions (the disjunction of these two by nascent capitalism marked the beginning of the modern era); the abolition, at least in theory, of the post-medieval split between public and private life; the governing of society by the party aristocracy (in this respect, one might say that contemporary Russia is actually one up on the Middle Ages—there is now only one aristocracy, uniting within itself the elite functions of both clergy and nobility); and last, but not least, the creation of a new serfdom, which ties the peasant to the land (it was only a few months ago that residents of collective
farms, who make up close to half the Soviet population, received the right to the internal passports necessary for travel). In other words, the dominant trait of Soviet life that Zbigniew Brzezinski has so aptly called the "bureaucratization of boredom" is not all that far removed from Marx's "idiocy of village life," the sophistication of Soviet technology notwithstanding.

This is obviously not exactly what the original promise was all about. Believers have consequently looked elsewhere for the realization of the socialist myth—of late, mainly to various Third World countries, with China currently heading the list. This is not the place to discuss the bizarre reiteration concerning China of all the old stratagems of wishful thinking that had previously been directed toward the Soviet Union. The main point is that many, if not all, of these socialist regimes can also be described quite well as "neo-medieval" (Shmuel Eisenstadt has suggested "neo-patrimonial," Pierre Bourdieu "socialo-feudal"). The basic formula for coping with the various disappointments is always the same (after, that is, the customarily prior denial that there is anything to be disappointed about): The disappointing country does not embody "true socialism"; therefore, it does not falsify the socialist vision; "true socialism" is either still in the future, or must be looked for elsewhere—if not in Russia then in China, if not in China then in Vietnam, and so on ad infinitum. An excellent illustration of this procedure is the designation of the Soviet system as "state capitalism," thus setting it off against the allegedly different system of the Chinese.

**Modernity and its discontents**

If these are some of the key features of the socialist myth, the question remains why intellectuals should have a particular affinity to it. As already suggested, the material interests of intellectuals as a "class" may well predispose them toward socialism. But an understanding of the mythic dimension of socialism suggests an additional explanation: *Intellectuals constitute a group particularly vulnerable to the discontents of modernity.*

To some extent this vulnerability is shared by the upper-middle class as a whole, the wider stratum within which intellectuals are found as a result either of birth or of social mobility. It is the upper-middle class that has evolved out of the old bourgeoisie, which had been the historical "carrier" of industrial capitalism and thus had been closer than any other group to the primary pro-
cesses of modernization. There were others, to be sure, who suffered materially from the birthpangs of modern society while the bourgeoisie reaped the material benefits—the impoverished and displaced rural populations, the new urban working class, the marginal groups generally subsumed under the category of lumpen-proletariat, and even the sectors of the aristocracy for whom modernization meant a decline in power and privilege. But the more subtle costs of modernization, involving meanings and norms, were exacted of the class closest to the inner turbulence of the process of modernization. It was the bourgeoisie that initially and most directly experienced the impact of rapid mobility, urbanization, pluralism, and affluence. Historians are not in agreement concerning the social, psychological, and ideological consequences of these experiences. It seems plausible, however, that the earlier version of the bourgeoisie succeeded in “containing” the disruptive effects of modernization mainly with the help of two crucial institutions—the family and the church. These two were the pillars of the world of bourgeois respectability, offering shelter to the individual from the alienating forces of modernization. It is precisely these two institutions that have been the major targets of the “adversary culture” of the intellectuals.

The bourgeoisie transformed the larger society in a cataclysmic manner, while at the same time it created a new form of the family, which functioned for its members as an island of tranquility at the very heart of the cataclysm. The “invention of childhood” (as recorded, for instance, by Philippe Ariès) was probably the most important institutional innovation in this respect, with far-reaching consequences for socialization and character formation. At the same time, especially in Protestant countries, the bourgeoisie was infused with a religious ethic that gave coherence and significance to the struggles in the economic, social, and political arenas. It is also probable that the bourgeois family and bourgeois religion were important factors in the very rise of the bourgeoisie to power. Significantly, bourgeois intellectualty turned against these institutions only after the historic victory of the bourgeoisie. In other words, the “adversary culture” arose within the bosom of a world that was already bourgeois in its dominant features.

The adversary intellectuals

At this point, the differentiation between two segments within the bourgeoisie becomes important—the much larger group of those
continuing to live within the respectabilities of bourgeois culture, and the initially quite small minority of intellectual adversaries. A question which cannot be answered here is the extent to which this distinction resulted from the respective relations of these two groups to the "mode of production"—the production of "things" by the former, as against the manipulation of symbols by the latter. In any event, this distinction still exists today in the upper-middle classes of contemporary Western societies—but with the exceedingly important difference that the numerical proportion of the two segments has changed drastically. (For the American situation, one may again turn to Kristol and Bell for the most persuasive interpretations of this change.)

Thus there still exists today an upper-middle-class stratum, broadly identified with business and with scientific/technological activities, which continues to "contain" the discontents of modernity within the old bourgeois structures of respectability. This stratum is still animated by the norms of the "Protestant ethic," is antiliberal in its family and personal values, and is still strongly attached to religion (not only ideologically, but through institutional participation). By contrast, there is a burgeoning "new class" of intellectuals, deeply antagonistic to virtually all the old norms of respectability. It is consumption-oriented rather than production-oriented. Its values for private life are ever more radically liberationist. It is pervasively secularized, often evincing a violent antipathy to all the traditional forms of Christian and Jewish religiosity. And, as a result, this stratum has come to be progressively deprived of the earlier protections against the discontents of modernity. Put simply, the old upper-middle class still manages to be "at home" in the modern world; but the intellectuals suffer increasingly from a profound sense of homelessness—and the socialist myth very directly meets their needs.

This is not to argue that there is something inevitable to this particular affinity. Other myths could, and indeed did, meet the same needs. Both conservative and nationalistic ideologies have had an appeal to intellectuals, as in Europe before World War II. It is very instructive that these were similar to socialist ideologies in that they were also "adversary" to the old bourgeois world—they were anticapitalist, opposed to liberal democracy, and contemptuous of the respectabilities of bourgeois culture. Yet none of them was able to accomplish the peculiar synthesis of modernity and counter-modernity characteristic of the socialist myth. It is certainly possible that new myths will arise on the "right," with
a new charisma and a strong appeal to intellectuals; the Third World is a likely locale for this. In the West, at this time, there is no sign of a new myth. The socialist myth is virtually without effective competition.

The power of myths

If the foregoing analysis is correct, there is no reason to expect the dominance of the "left" on the Western intellectual scene to be reversed. The intrinsic power of the socialist vision appears as strong as ever. The new position of the "knowledge industry" has given intellectuals more influence than ever before and has thus given the socialist myth an unprecedented institutional base. Indeed, the myth has achieved a sort of cultural establishment. To be sure, there are great variations within the ecclesiastical community gathered around the myth, and there will continue to be variations. The myth may or may not be couched in terms of Marxist theory; it may be pro-Soviet or anti-Soviet, pro-Maoist or anti-Maoist; it may enter into shifting alliances with other ideologies (such as the counterculture, or politically active Christian groups); it may have different postures toward the norms and institutions of liberal democracy. Yet, in all these transmutations, the myth retains—must retain—its essential antagonism to the world of capitalism and bourgeois culture. Thus to the extent that Western societies continue to be organized by the institutions of that world, those who adhere to the socialist vision will also retain their anti-Western animus.

Myths are not easily generated or manipulated. They have their own dynamics, their own "truth." What can be termed the mythic deprivation of Western societies in the face of the socialist vision thus cannot be remedied by an effort of the will. It is one thing for the historian or social scientist to diagnose the condition, quite another thing to devise plausible remedies. With socialism as the only good myth going, the political and economic elites of Western societies have become remarkably demoralized. The old rhetoric in defense of free enterprise, of the American way of life, and even of the institutions of liberal democracy has come to sound hollow—it increasingly lacks the capacity to convince and inspire. Calls for a revival of liberalism or of the American creed, however well reasoned, will be ineffective unless they can be "fueled" by the power of mythic plausibility. It seems unlikely that, on its own, liberalism—least of all in its social-democratic versions—
is capable of regaining such power (in Western Europe the mythic edge is unmistakably held by the left wings of the social-democratic parties—that is, by those elements least connected with the liberal tradition). It remains possible that there will come a new upsurge of mythical nationalism in the West—even new forms of fascism—but even then it is likely that the essential elements of the socialist vision will be retained. In all likelihood, such an upsurge would take the form of national socialism (the terminological likeness to what emerged under this same label in the 1920's and 1930's in Europe is not at all accidental).

There is, however, one fairly effective remedy against the power of the socialist myth—the experience of living in a society where that myth has been politically elevated to the status of official doctrine. One of the savage ironies of the times is that ideologically Marxism is on the ascendancy everywhere—except in the countries that call themselves Marxist. One cannot lure a cat from behind the chimney with Marxist rhetoric in the Soviet Union or in Eastern Europe. There Marxism is ceremony, the myth has become a petrified ornament. On the basis of that empirical evidence, one prediction is fairly certain: Western intellectuals will cease to be fascinated by the socialist myth soon after Western societies are taken over by socialist regimes. It must be added, however, that in the not improbable case that these regimes will resemble Soviet totalitarianism, this belated conversion will have little, if any, political significance. For totalitarian regimes, it appears, can survive for a long time without plausible myths and in a cultural climate of pervasive cynicism.

There is one more possibility: a reversal of the long-standing trend of secularization in the Western world generally, and particularly in its cultural elite. Throughout most of human history, the myths that guided life, including political life, sprang from the soil of religious faith. The possibility of such a revival is nowhere more relevant than in America, where religion has had a unique relationship to the social realities of pluralism and political freedom. Religious faith, it need hardly be added, cannot be decided upon or engineered merely through rational insight into its importance. The spirit blows where it wills. However, those who have a stake in the future of liberal democracy, and who are troubled by the delegitimations it has recently undergone, would do well to ponder its relationship to the vital forces of religion still existing in American society.

None of this has an immediate bearing on the gauchiste extra-
vaganza now sweeping the intellectual scene in Western countries. The reasonable expectation is that it will continue, though its ideological details may change from time to time. Those who have come under the sway of the socialist myth are not likely to be dissuaded by arguments, for they have a seemingly unending capacity to reinterpret evidence. They will not be appeased by reforms within Western societies or by protestations of humane concern by those who do not share their ultimate vision. Nor is any of this surprising, once it is understood that they are under the sway of a myth. Myths derive their power from those realms of the mind in which the gods used to dwell, and the gods have always been relentless.

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