



"A couple of days into post-communism a friend of mine said he was off to the hypnotist to stop smoking. While he was at it, he said, he might as well get the whole Communist era wiped out as well. It would be soothing, a straight transfer from Kerensky and the Duma to Yeltsin and the Russian parliament, with everything in between a blur. Whatever happened to that nice Czar Nicholas? Collectivization, what's that? Joseph who?" - *Alexander Cockburn*

After the fall: the failure of communism and the future of socialism
Edited by Robin Blackburn (Verso, 1991)

*Review by STEPHEN LOUW**

The above quotation, taken from one of the contributions to this collection, accurately summarises a popular response to the communist experiment in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union: close your eyes and pretend it didn't happen. There are, however, 'left' sympathetic thinkers who do not regard the adjective democratic in 'democratic-socialism' to be self-evident. Those who wish to interrogate critically the *communist* tradition in a search for a democratic and economically viable form of *socialism*, will not be happy with such an approach. It is to such an audience that Robin Blackburn's collection is aimed.

The contributors to the collection argue that the conditions in which communist revolutions occurred adversely affected their chances of success. They took place in countries lacking developed economic infrastructures and without traditions of democratic rule. Furthermore, soon after seizing power they were faced with vicious offensives by the imperialist powers.

But this does not justify the repression by the new regimes that followed. The arrogance of the Leninist Parties and their insistence on the scientific status of Marxism-Leninism must take

a good share of the blame. (Remember Lenin's boast that "Marxism is all-powerful because it is true".) Armed with an infallible doctrine, the vanguard party's policy of substituting itself for the working class rapidly turned into an excuse to do away with democratic institutions and justify the perpetuation of one party dictatorships.

A second reason for the collapse of the communist regimes is their economic stagnation. Central planning was relatively effective when there was a clearly defined national priority - for example the construction of a defence industry - to which all other demands were subordinated. From an overall perspective, however, it was a disastrous mistake which contemporary socialists should not try to repeat. In this regard the message is clear. As one of the contributors to this volume, Jürgen Habermas, puts it, "complex societies are unable to reproduce themselves if they do not leave intact the logic of an economy that reproduces itself through the market" (p 40).

This does not mean that socialists should abandon their commitment to egalitarianism and to economic democracy. The simple logic of 'the market' remains antithetical to democracy.

* *Department of Political Studies, University of the Witwatersrand*

In a context of unequal individual capacities and circumstances, it discriminates against the weak and the poor and allows the rich and powerful to exert an unaccountable influence on society.

In short, the message is that socialists have to learn to utilise the positive aspects of the market - its ability to co-ordinate the decisions and actions of millions of independent actors in an efficient and *relatively* cheap manner - without slipping into acceptance of the neo-conservative illusions about the 'free market' of Thatcher and Reagan. Neither of these, Norberto Bobbio reminds us in his contribution, has managed to solve the problems which originally gave rise to working class movements.

In order to do this, the market has to be socialised and subordinated to democratically - not centrally - determined objectives. Whilst this form of socialism-with-markets will seem inherently reformist to the surviving left-overs of the Third (and Fourth) Internationals, the arguments advanced in its favour seem more likely to win popular support than the Marxist call for an end to commodity production.

A second argument in favour of the socialised market (or "market socialism") is an ecological one. People must be made accountable for the resources they consume. Such accountability will necessarily require continual interaction between management of industry and representatives of environmental and community interest groups. It will also require the public disclosure of information central to the running of these concerns, a factor which is a direct assault on the unfettered operation of 'the market'.

At the same time, we must be careful not to overstate the importance of economic failure in our analysis of the collapse of the communist regimes. Many countries with far lower standards of living have been able to withstand the pressures of widespread dissatisfaction and revolt. In contributor Fred Halliday's view, the decisive aspect that needs to be examined is the way in which the changes in global communications made it impossible for the regimes to shelter their subjects from news about conditions in the western world. Once the enthusiastic commitment to the industrialisation

drive had ended, people were no longer willing to contribute an ever increasing proportion of their resources to the arms race. Unless we take seriously the effects of this change in popular opinion in the communist countries, we will not make sense of the collapse.

But it is not only the market mechanism that needs to be taken on by the socialist tradition. Norberto Bobbio argues that while the limitations of 'liberal democracy' must be subject to a permanent critique, it is important to acknowledge that the 'four fundamental freedoms of modern man' - individual liberty, freedom of the press and opinion, freedom of assembly, and freedom of association - are central to the socialist project. They make it possible. Without these freedoms it would be impossible for free trade unions and free parties to be formed, and for the concept of a democratically managed and pluralist society to have any relevance at all (p 3-5).

The book is not, however, without its disappointments. In contrast to those who see multi-party democracy as a viable alternative to the concept of proletarian democracy defended by classical Marxism, Ralph Miliband argues that "some degree of representation may be unavoidable, but it should be kept to the minimum." He urges that socialists should vigorously defend "the radical alternative to representative democracy" as stipulated by Marx and Lenin (p 12). Can we really take Miliband seriously in the light of Lenin's definition of the dictatorship of the proletariat as "rule won and maintained by the use of violence by the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, rule that is unrestricted by any laws" ? With all due respect to Miliband, this is not a promotion of unrestricted popular rule, and is certainly not something which should be defended, in however qualified a fashion, by democratic socialists today.

What then are we to make of the socialist project in the context of the contemporary 'crisis of Marxism'? We have to break decisively from the classical Marxist tradition by

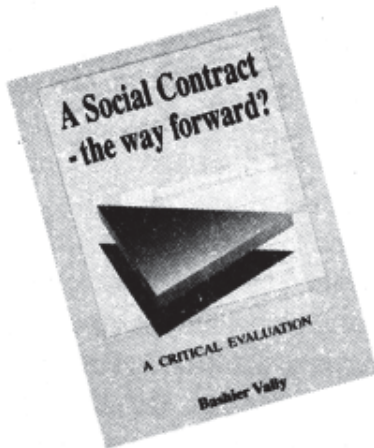
- accepting that a true communist person, who is neither selfish nor greedy, does not exist; and

● accepting – and not just as interim measures – that the market and representative democracy need to be defended for the freedoms (although imperfect) which they contain.

This is, however, a necessary development. As Robin Blackburn points out: “As we enter the last decade of the twentieth century, the ruin of Marxist-Leninist Communism has been sufficiently comprehensive to eliminate it as an alternative to capitalism and to compromise the very idea of socialism. Today’s moribund ‘Great Power Communism’ is not a spectre stalking the globe but an unhappy spirit, begging to be laid

to rest” (p 173).

For those of us disgruntled with the failure of the classical Marxist tradition to provide a workable alternative to Soviet-style communism, but who believe that the struggle against the capitalist system is far from over, this book marks an excellent move in the correct direction. It is a great pity that the South African Communist Party has chosen to ignore the very real lessons of history which this book so effectively highlights, and, like Alexander Cockburn’s friend, they have preferred to close their eyes and pretend that nothing ever happened. ☆



**A social contract
- the way forward?
A critical evaluation
By Bashier Vally
(Phambili Books
Johannesburg, 1992)**

Reviewed by LANGA ZITA

From De Loor* to Enoch Godongwana, from Geoff Schreiner to Barend du Plessis (before his knock out by NUMSA’s Fanaroff), the social contract is the buzz word as South Africa slowly moves away from formal apartheid, and debates over economic strategies attempt to move with the times.

In this context, Bashier Vally’s slim volume on the social contract is a welcome, although introductory, contribution to this debate. He has two main objectives in this book. His first is to introduce the basic concept of the social contract. His second is to offer a dismissal of this project.

1 What is a social contract?

At the outset, it is necessary to point out some concerns in relation to Vally’s understanding of the social contract. On page 3 he says “the terms ‘social contract’ and ‘corporatism’ are

used interchangeably”. In this context corporatism is the same as social democracy and social accord.

I am not comfortable with this. Firstly, it seems to me that corporatism has various faces - one of which is fascism! Secondly, whilst the participating parties are the same (state, labour, capital) in all these forms of corporatism, particular historical, economic and ideological factors are important in understanding the subtle differences that exist, for example, between the corporatism of Australia and that of Sweden.

A social accord that might be agreed in this period of transition in South Africa would have a different character yet again. It seems to me that to conflate these modes of corporatism is not helpful at all.

Vally is relatively successful in his initial undertaking when he looks at the current debates in South Africa on the social contract. In this regard, he quotes the *Business Day* (19/2/91) which argues that, “South Africa’s ‘haves’ must

* Head of government committee on housing