

On Comparisons

by **Howard Fast**

THE EMPEROR CHARLAMAGNE celebrated one of his great victories by giving over ten thousand prisoners the choice of baptism or death by the headsman's ax; which, if a somewhat arbitrary proceeding, nevertheless marked an advance over the wholesale execution of prisoners by the Romans only a few centuries before. When the Romans overthrew Jerusalem in 71 A. D. and took perhaps a million Jews captive, they realized that such a flooding of the slave market as this invited could break, not only prices, but the market itself; and with that in mind, they executed enough Jews to remove the threat to the market. But the 14 Century, the execution of prisoners of war took place only to the extent that they were inconvenient to the captors, and by the 19th Century, only non-white prisoners of war were executed as a matter of policy. And the 20th Century brought forth a covenant—if often violated—on all prisoners of war.



IT WOULD seem to go without saying that no period or social structure could justify its acts by comparison with the age that preceded it; and painful and uneven as the process may seem, the fact is that the human race is coming to maturity. Old and outworn social forms that can no longer serve the needs of the people are cast aside, and new social forms come into being. The old, however, can never justify the new, and comparisons between them on the basis of such justification are most often unfortunate. Particularly is each new social stage marked by its attitude toward the individual and its regard for the individual.

Always, so long as history is recorded, the oppressed have been the central factor in social change; and the violation of the simplest rights of the individual has been written in blood across their backs throughout history. Out of this arose humanism, which may be best defined as an attitude, outlook or philosophy based on the needs of human beings rather than on the injunctions and laws of religion.

HUMANISM is as old as mankind, but its broad growth as an articulated philosophy began with the downfall of feudalism and the beginning of capitalism. Almost at that time, humanism began to raise questions of economic equality and to project visions of a socialist future, as if it instinctively recognized that the needs of people rested broadly and solidly upon an economic base. The development of socialist humanism gave mankind, for the first time, a realistic and practical path to a future where injustice and oppression would no longer plague humanity.

It is rather terrible that only now have we reawakened to the fact that humanism cannot mechanically be equated with economic progress and the wiping out of poverty and starvation. The bitter—and so often distorted—work of George Orwell takes on nightmarish qualities, unless we demand a perspective from our own understanding and principled belief in socialism. Once and for all, we must understand that we cannot judge different social systems by comparison, but must instead judge them by the principles which brought them into being; and that humanism is a yardstick we must always hold up to socialism.

I, FOR ONE, would want never again to read in this paper or in any other organ dedicated to socialism a justification of our own injustice or stupidity by citing the injustice and stupidity of our enemies. I would want never again to see injustice in the Soviet Union or China or the Peoples Democracies absolved by explaining that our American injustice is so much more and blatant. Such comparisons are not only invalid; they are destructive and confusing in their implications.

At this date, no American reactionary would be senseless enough to justify or attempt to justify wage cuts on the basis that under a slave system workers are paid nothing at all. The essential moral prop of capitalism is that it rejected and, for the most part, wiped out slavery as an economic system. Comparisons in this sense between the two systems are not valid.

On the other hand, I read an article from L'Unita in Rome, a communist organ, which, while acknowledging the injustice of the Rajik trial, congratulated the Hungarians on their self-critical attitude and demanded where was a similar response from the White House re the Rosenberg Case. But the Rosenberg Case can make the Rajik Case neither more or less right. The unspeakable frame-up of the Rosenbergs, of Sacco and Vanzetti, of the Haymarket Martyrs and the Molly Maguires and Joe Hill and a hundred more. the judicial lynchings of Negroes, the kangaroo court frame-ups under the Smith Act—these are of the nature of reactionary capitalism.

NO ONE has to tell us of this. We live with it, hate it, and swear that we will some day make a better world—a world in which none of these things will exist. Have we no right then to place a yardstick of justice and right against that better world that stands a-dawning and already contains almost half of mankind? I think we have. Does this mean that we love socialism less? I think it means we love it more.

The honest man who justifies his actions by using the yardstick of a scoundrel will soon end up a scoundrel himself; and the man who says we will pigeonhole democracy for the time being while we do first things first, is likely to find that the first things become the second things and so on.

The dark secrets of the dungeons of the Bastille were beyond human endurance; and the man who was led away to disappear without trial or witness became a living horror and unbearable nightmare to millions of mankind. When the Bastille was taken, men swore an oath that its like would never happen again. There is a whole record of such oaths in man's climb from darkness; and may all the fates that be help us if we should ever forget one of them.