

REFLECTIONS ON AN ARTICLE BY JOHN GATES

The Ex-Communists and the Renewal of American Socialism

By H. W. BENSON

Within a few years, thousands have left the Communist Party; together with other tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of sympathizers and friends, they seem to have melted away as a political force leaving the CP itself nothing but a sectarian shell dominated by the Stalinist-minded Fosterites and allies. What, meanwhile, has happened to the ex-Communists? And what is their state of mind? It is impossible to make any generalization with assurance but a clue to their evolution can be discovered in the March issue of *The Progressive*, a special issue on "The Russians and Ourselves" which includes contributions by Howard Fast and John Gates.

Fast's comments are a reprint of his TV interview with Martin Agronsky shortly after his break with the CP and consequently add nothing essentially new to what he has already written in his book and in his articles. In a personalized account of how he broke with the party, Fast expresses a deep revulsion at the dictatorship in Russia and underlines his own dedication to democracy and socialism. Beyond that, important as it is, he does not enter into the discussion of the future of socialism in the United States and perspectives for ex-Communists. Doubtless, there are many who share his view but who have neither the inclination nor the possibility of expressing it in public. They, we can assume, have no idea of what to do in any organized fashion but are determined to stand for democracy.

A PLACE FOR EX-CPERS

John Gates, in his article "The Failure of Communism in America," recounts his own past in the party and at the same time looks toward the future of socialism in the United States, without presuming to outline any elaborate perspective for himself or for others. He is concerned with one question in detail, and here he pursues the same objective as he did in his series in the *New York Post*: He is anxious to find, or to claim, a place for the ex-Communist within the liberal, radical, democratic and socialist movements and tendencies of our time. It is a perfectly understandable, and legitimate, objective. Apart from the political line of the CP and of its role as an organization, the tens of thousands who joined it were attracted because they sought democracy and socialism however distorted their image became and however devious the path seemed to them.

It was a paradox and a tragedy that they could be led to support and sustain a terrible anti-socialist dictatorship. But at last, they were driven out of the CP because they realized, in the end, that it had betrayed the very ideals they sought within it. It is not necessarily true of all; some have doubtless abandoned all ideals to join the ranks of the cynics and sneerers who scoff at the very possibility of socialism and freedom. But many remained dedicated to socialism; it required a long time and shattering events to convince them that the road to socialism was not through the CP or through totalitarian dictatorship.

But so it happened. And now, those who have broken with the CP because they want to work for democracy, peace and socialism must seek an outlet for their ideals without the undignified recantations and humiliating confessions that they remember so well from Stalinism. So far, we have no reason to look for a quarrel with Gates.

Gates writes principally of the CP but he comments briefly on the failure of socialism generally in the United States. "All [socialist groups] are out of joint with the American people, although for different reasons. The fault, I believe, lies not with the people but with the socialist movements. They all require a good look at themselves, their theories and programs and need to make big changes to help bring about a mass American socialist movement." And, as one "tentative idea" he suggests, "America needs a mass radical movement. I use the term 'radical' advisedly—first, because we need to get closer to the root of matters; secondly, because radicalism is a more embracing concept than socialism. Few Americans as yet believe in socialism, but many are interested in fundamental reforms that fall short of socialism but are necessary for its achievement."

Surely, everyone has made mistakes. On that, we remain on safe ground. The nature of these mistakes and the degree to which they contributed to the failures of socialism—these questions will be debated and discussed for a long time. So, too, policies, programs, changes, evaluation and reevaluation will occupy the attention

of any intellectually alert and politically effective movement. Above all, socialism must be properly related to all radical movements. There are, by the way, movements of this type already in existence. The CIO was one; there is the ADA, the Liberal Party; the AFL-CIO. Everything is relative and in the context of the American scene these are the radicals with a mass following.

WHAT DO WE DO NOW?

Perhaps Gates is right that a new radical movement of some kind will come. In that case, the socialist movement will have to find its proper place within it. Socialism must not be separated from any mass radical movement. Nevertheless, we hope that it will always remain a distinctive current. In any case, what do we do now? The problem today is to find the most effective way of building the socialist movement and for that, to examine the position of every socialist tendency and the relations among them. And, in this, where do the ex-Communists stand and where do they belong?

Gates was one of the top leaders of the CP; his resignation was a big blow to it and a political act of the greatest significance, coming as it did after a dispute that necessarily raised issues of the most basic consequence to socialism. During the fight inside the CP, he and his followers spoke up with some passion. In the *Progressive* article he reviews the struggle in the CP, and some of the issues and ideas around which it revolved.

He relates that the successes in Russia had "blinded us to its errors and crimes." And at a meeting of the party national committee, "This Soviet intervention in Hungary, I found myself saying, is a crime, a crime it will take us years to overcome, I cried out, 'For the first time in all my years in the Party, I feel ashamed of the name Communist.'" He is ready to be "critical of the failure of these [Communist] countries to achieve political democracy" and he sees now that "Political Democracy does not come automatically with the transfer of production from private to public ownership—a fact which I and many others were late in appreciating. Power can be abused; tyrannies can arise in planned societies; and eternal vigilance is the price of liberty for socialism too." (Like others who have left the CP he has not yet faced up to this question: how, where there is tyranny can you speak of "public" ownership? Is socialism impossible without democracy?)

He assesses his stand inside the CP and its 1956 program as follows: "The changes were so fundamental that if carried out the Communist Party would no longer be a Communist Party in the traditional sense but something altogether different." It is fair then to say that Gates is truly an ex-Communist; he stands for "something altogether different." But the question then arises for him and those who think like him; how do you distinguish yourself from the various socialist groups and tendencies that already exist?

IMPLIED CRITICISM

Gates does not pretend to reply, "After 27 years of dogmatic adherence to the Communist Party, I do not profess to have the answers. I feel the need to think, to study, to listen to others, to discuss and debate. I am in no haste to join or form something new." But Gates does offer an implied criticism of various socialist groups; and it is here that we get an inkling of his own views:

"A revitalized socialist movement must not only clarify its relations with the broader movements of the workers and others. It must also reexamine its relations with the Communist-led countries. If American Communists have been blinded by admiration, other socialists have been

blinded by hate. Those obsessed with hostility to the Communist countries as their chief reason for existence lack independence just as much as do the Communists and, however unwittingly, help sustain the cold war and domestic witchhunts."

It is painful to read it—and terribly disappointing—but there it is. Presumably, the various socialist groups have been "blinded by hate" and "obsessed with hostility"; while Gates is not. His attitude here is undoubtedly shared by many ex-Communists who imagine that Socialists are "anti-Soviet" and prefer nothing more than denouncing Russia.

HOLDOVER FROM THE PAST

But this is all an ironic holdover from the past. The underlying basis for the opinion has been actually discarded but the conclusion that derived from it remains. In other words it is nothing more than a pure prejudice, at best. What, for example, is the actual meaning of "anti-Soviet"? If it presumably refers to those who would like to see capitalism restored in Russia, it would be hard to find socialists of any type who propose it, except perhaps among candidates for a mental institution. Does it apply to those who might call for a war on Russia? Who suggests that? There remain only those who would adjust their own policy in every respect to U.S. foreign policy, seeing in the military might of America the only bulwark against Russia. There are some who hold such views but only a small and dwindling circle.

Gates realizes that "tyrannies can arise in planned societies." There is no question that a majority of socialists in the United States believe that such a tyranny has risen inside Russia and they speak out against it vigorously and publicly. No one is idiotic enough to contend that the basis for building a strong socialist movement in the United States is attacking injustice in Russia. Socialists concentrate in the main on the fight for democracy and socialism here and devote themselves to the problems of America. But at the same time, it is our obligation to speak out against injustice everywhere, in the United States and in Algiers as well as in Russia. The question is: does a vigorous and public opposition to dictatorship in Russia make a socialist "anti-Soviet," "blinded by hate," "obsessed by hostility"?

When he was still in the Communist Party, Gates found it possible to criticize Russian policy as criminal without helping to sustain the cold war, even in the face of Fosterite charges that his friends were helping the witchhunt. And, presumably, he is able to do the same outside the party. Are we entitled to say publicly now what Gates and his supporters said then inside the party? Or, do we somehow become "anti-Soviet"?

Consider it from another angle. At one time in recent history, Socialists denounced the Moscow Trials as monstrous frameups; they protested against the execution of the Bundists, Ehrlich and Alter; they cried out against Stalinist terror; they tried to arouse world opinion against the extermination of whole nationalities. There were few Communists who believed at the time that these charges were anything more than lies.

It is understandable, then, that they must have assumed that Socialists were nothing but fanatical, even perverted, "anti-Soviet" elements, obsessed by hostility. But those times are gone. Now, we know that even the wildest charges of Stalin's enemies fell far short of the awful truth: it is that knowledge which has destroyed the American Communist Party and driven the vast majority of its membership toward democracy. It was nothing more than the same knowledge acquired earlier, not blind hatred, that turned most Socialists into vocal opponents of the Russian ruling regime.

ALL FOR DEMOCRACY NOW

We are all for democracy now and that is a good thing. But will it come in Communist countries as a dispensation from the rulers above to the masses below; will it come through an internal evolution of the regimes themselves toward freedom, a little more with each passing year? Gates is not quite ready to say; in any case, he essays no clear statement in the *Progressive*. But we think it fair to say that such are his leanings. If so, he shares a view accepted by many others in the world socialist movement.

Or, will democracy come through the struggle of the people against their regimes? Such is our own view. This has nothing to do with being "anti-Soviet"; it has nothing to do with stimulating the cold war or provoking antagonisms among the nations. Only a madman would want a new war. But this is what we believe because we have no confidence in the ruling classes anywhere—capitalist or Communist and because as socialists we look toward the workers, the students, the democrats. There has been evaluation and reevaluation and we have done our share of examining the past in order to prepare for the future. But in this respect, we find no need to alter our opinion, except perhaps to make it clearer and to implant it deeper in our own consciousness.

No one should demand that John Gates and the ex-Communists for whom he speaks have a completely rounded-out point of view. They have come a long way in a short while under the impact of stunning events. And it is not necessary, of course, that their views become completely consistent, let alone that they coincide completely with our own or with those of other existing socialist tendencies before they can find a fruitful place in a renewed democratic socialist movement. But the cause of socialist renewal will hardly be served by insistence on their part that other socialists renounce their opposition to the dictatorial regime in Russia.

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