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Socialism: The Day After or the Day Yet to Be

INTRODUCTION

To many of our generation, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the simultaneous collapse of the socialist bloc, are of course a matter of great sadness. It is a source of sullen resentment as well. The struggling people in country after country in Asia, Africa and Latin America had subsisted for decades on end on the socialist dream; the calamity of the shattering of that dream has caused a devastation of the mind the magnitude of which is still awesomely difficult to assess. It is not just a collapse of a system; the debacle has been interpreted as in effect the liquidation of a collage of ideas and of praxis inspired by those ideas. A number of facile syllogisms have sprung to life, and the search is on for locating the fatal flaw which has laid low what was once the embodiment of pride and glory. Arriving at far-out conclusions has been the order of the day. Because socialism has been discredited in the ramparts of eastern Europe, it is as if socialist ideologues have no further right to cling to their convictions. Since the Soviet Union has ceased to be, none seemingly have the prerogative any more to defend, for example, the public sector, or campaign for the reduction of income inequalities, or protest against intrusion of foreign capital into their lands. There have been other set-backs. The wholesale assault on ideological beliefs apart, the petering out of Third World solidarity can be directly related to the apocalypse in eastern Europe. The Non-Aligned Movement perhaps had its early inspiration from other sources, but it really came to life because it found a role for itself in the years of the Cold War. The Movement has, to all appearances, lost its profession now that, with the cessation of the socialist bloc, non-alignment is deprived of its *raison d'être*. True, in certain quarters non-alignment tended to be defined as the propensity to move up and down on both sides of the street. In its quintessence, it nonetheless represented a certain dignity of thought and action and enabled the Third World to assert its separate persona. It also reflected a genre of

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persona. It also reflected a genre of courage. A defiance marked the demeanour of the nations who swore by non-alignment: we do not have might; we do not often have resources even; but we are not scared of the rattling of the sabre by the superpowers; we have the moral strength to differ from them, to criticise them, to offer them creative solutions to problems which they in their folly have been responsible for in the first instance.

That moral peak has disappeared. The Third World countries continue to strut about; nobody particularly cares for them. Woebegonely, many of the erstwhile major domos of the Non-Aligned Movement are now realising that the halo that came to be attached to their reputation was a borrowed specimen: it was because the socialist bloc had chosen to back them to the hilt that western powers, including the United States, grew to respect them.

The disappearance of the socialist system in eastern Europe has had grave repercussions in another major area, namely, in the assessment of the role of economic planning toward fostering social and economic growth. It is perhaps bordering on tautology to suggest that the disintegration of the socialist polities in eastern Europe has coincided with the crumbling of command economy. The causality of the process however bristles with difficulties. A notion which has of late gained in strength is that it is the abysmal performance of centralised economic planning which was responsible for the socialist debacle in eastern Europe; had the planned system succeeded in delivering the goods and services new generations in eastern Europe clamoured for, socialism could have been saved. This is a serious charge and deserves to be examined with some care.

To grow wise after the event is an essential attribute of human nature. If reports which filter through are to be believed, the peoples in eastern Europe are now discovering, *ex post*, several important virtues in the erstwhile socialist economic arrangements on which they had been accustomed to pour scorn year after year. Whatever its other deficiencies, socialism, it is now readily admitted, ensured stable prices. It used to arrange a regular supply of basic food and other consumer articles. It offered modest housing at unbelievable low rates, even though supply lagged behind demand, and the quality of housing that was offered left much to be desired. Socialism took care, in fact took loving care, of old men and women and children. Even in the remotest villages and the most backward republics of Soviet Union, socialism connoted universal literacy and a greatly enhanced status for women. It guaranteed total health care and nutritional standards for all sections of the people. It promised full employment, whatever the level of 'efficiency' associated with such full employment. It also used to happen almost as a matter of course that two-thirds of the Olympic medals came to be won by young men and women from the socialist world. Should not one add, socialism also meant the distribution of

hundreds of millions of works of Shakespeare and Gorky and Pushkin and discs and tapes of classical music at throwaway prices. Nor should we forget the across-the-board resuscitation of people's art, music and dance forms in the vast stretches of central Asian republics, quite apart from the pinnacles of achievement the Bolshoi and Kirov Ballet groups attained with direct encouragement from the Soviet authorities. Even if we choose to ignore the significance of the exceedingly short time-frame within which these goals were accomplished, it would still be absurd to slur over the fact that, simultaneously, the socialist system was able to develop a defence network which was possibly only a shade inferior in capability to the United States military machine, and, in some areas of defence technology, such as space research, the socialist bloc held for decades a significant lead over the American camp.

The command economic system failed to deliver sophisticated consumer goods. It did not come up with massive supplies of colour television sets, two-door refrigerators, slick passenger cars and luxurious textiles and other fineries. It either could not, or did not care to study the transformed mind-set of the grand-children and great-grand-children of the Revolution. It failed to meet the challenge of the social convulsion resulting from the arrival of satellite television channels which made nonsense of assumptions about supposedly unbridgeable political and ideological divides. There should be no scope of dissembling here: that new generations in socialist societies succumbed to the lure dangled from across the borders was because the system suffered from a debilitating deficiency. It neglected the task of building the socialist man as envisaged by Marx and Engels and Lenin. One can scan the syllabi pursued in schools, gymnasia and universities in the east European countries in the post-Second World War decades. The creation of the socialist man was, quite evidently, not a part of the political agenda and therefore excluded from the academic fora. The emphasis was on assembly-line production of unalloyed technocrats, who were supposed to fill slots within an unthinking, unquestioning bureaucracy. The challenge of creating the socialist man was basically the theme which sparked the Cultural Revolution in China in the sixties. It had however few customs elsewhere in the socialist world. And in China too, it soon became the victim of its own excesses.

Once the satellites were marshalled in the cause of global telecommunications, East Europe proved to be the easiest of pickings. The youth, in overwhelming numbers and along with them, significant sections of urban groups were ready to pursue the mirage of the life-style of West Europe and North America beamed by the electronic media.

A general uprising was thus almost made to order. In most of the countries, the system collapsed from within. What has ensued is what Americans call Monday-moring-quarterbacking. It is relatively easy to heap the blame on the central command system for the collapse since the planning apparatus was in each east European country responsible for the overall production schedule and its breakdown into different commodities and services. But the puzzle remains. Did the economic command system capsize because of its own deficiencies, imperfections and internal contradictions, or because it was at the receiving end of wrong directives? Instructions transmitted by the top echelon of the political hierarchy were without question often ineptly laundered within the planning *apparatchik*. Sometimes they were interpreted in a wrong way, sometimes they were amended or modulated on the sly to suit the convenience of functionaries at different levels of the economic command, and at other times data on production and costs were fudged. But the crucial major decisions affecting central planning could always be distinguished from irritants of this nature. For instance, the basic resource allocations, responsible for the tilt against luxury consumption and for the excessive weightage to defence and defence production, were always at the behest of the political leadership. It is the dog of political decision-making which wagged the tail of the economic programme, and not the other way round.

The occupants at the top of the political hierarchy were the final arbiters of two crucial decisions which defined both the long-term pattern of growth and the availability of different categories of goods and services in the immediate period. The first decision was with respect to the proportion of the national product to be appropriated for savings and investment (the two coinciding in a near-closed economy); the second related to the allocation of assigned investible resources among the different producing sectors. Both decisions were in essence political. True, the party leadership could—and did—solicit information and views from the economic planners which could help it to make up its mind. But the onus of the final decisions rested on it. If the consequences of these decisions were disenchantment, riots and near-insurgencies, finally leading to the disintegration of the system, these were the direct outcome of the political process at work. The leadership transmitted the orders. It is in response to such orders that the command apparatus produced specified goods or did not produce them, or produced goods that were not matched either in quality or quantity by what the demand signalled.

The broad politico-economic decisions could of course be the end-product of complex considerations. The political authorities might have been, for instance, perfectly aware that certain measures proposed to be enforced by them were going to be unpopular with the

masses; it was still felt that these were required to be carried out in view of some issues of principle involved, or on account of some long-range considerations that were at stake. There could have been, on the other hand, some politico-economic decisions which were wrong and short-sighted on most considerations. Such decisions nonetheless eventuated because of a gross 'systems-failure' within the political movement.

This issue merits further analysis. The international socialist movement has sustained itself over the past century and a quarter on the edifice of an organisational principle known as democratic centralism. The principle has served the movement in extremely good stead. The fundamental notion underlying the doctrine was encapsulated by Lenin as 'freedom of discussion, unity of action', that is, all substantive matters are to be discussed thoroughly; once the discussions are over, decisions are to be reached on the basis of majority vote. Once the majority has voted a particular way, its decision is binding on each constituent member, including on those who had expressed dissent with it during the discussions. This concept of discipline was to be implanted into a democratic structure. At a subsequent stage, the Seventeenth Congress of the CPSU (1934) defined democratic centralism in terms of four basic characteristics which were subsequently adopted by most Communist Parties in the world: election of all leading bodies of the party; periodic accountability of those elected to their respective organisations; strict party discipline with subordination of the minority to the majority; and, finally, mandates from higher bodies binding on lower bodies as well as on all party members.

While the last point, together with the rule enjoining submission of the minority to majority decision*, represented the element of 'centralism', the fact that the higher bodies themselves were *elected*, at the Party Congress, were accountable to the Congress and derived their authority from the imprimatur of the Congress, constituted the democratic base upon which the centralism was supposed to stand.

Since the Congress, where party units at the grassroots level were represented and represented *qua* grass roots level party units, was the supreme authority, the possibility of views expressed not being transmitted to the higher or highest bodies was assumed to be remote. On the contrary, in such an arrangement the Centre was obliged to obey the signals from below. On the one hand the collective judgment that was formed benefited from the wisdom and knowledge that the leading cadres were invested with and on the other, with the practical

*Though Lenin had earlier defended the existence of factions, the vigours of the Civil War period and its immediate aftermath made him propose a resolution at the Tenth Congress in 1921 outlawing factions. The resolution was carried.

experience and information gathered at the grassroots. Democratic centralism thus reflected the unity of theory and practice and contributed the basis for the formation of a self-correcting and self-redeeming vanguard.

The shadow, however, fell at certain crucial junctures. There are few doubts that the centralism of the kind delineated by Lenin and his comrades was violated times without number within the international socialist political movement. It is a lurid chapter in the history of socialism. Democratic centralism was made to stand on its head. Democracy gradually disappeared, centralism held centrestage. The leaders, who were idolised, took it for granted that such idolatry did no harm to the tenets of socialism or to the functioning of the system. Once the spirit of democracy was enfeebled, lower echelons of the political structure tended to be mowed down by loyalists and yesmen who would, in all seasons, do the bidding of those superior to them in the hierarchy. The inevitable happened. Summary decisions reached at the top were transmitted, layer after layer and level after level, all the way down to the very bottom of the hierarchy. Only the form of democratic centralism was maintained. The superstructure took the base almost for granted. What masses thought or felt on the major political, social or economic questions of the day ceased to be important. The views of the leaders were rendered into axiomatic truth and had to be supported by *ex post* empirical exercises that were often indistinguishable from plain cheating.

Whether, in case democratic centralism were allowed the fullest rein, the command economy could have staved off the crisis of socialism caused by the mismatch between demand and supply remains an open question. It is nevertheless important to have the formulation right. The command economy did not fail the socialist polity; it is the latter which was the dominant element in the system that guided the impulses, and shaped the activities, of the economic command.

CENTRALISM, CENTRAL PLANNING AND COMPETITION

This was a tragedy, and in more ways than one. Let me in my whimsical way, pursue one particular line of thought. The ideology of socialism as well as collectivist economic arrangements have been subjected to sustained attack throughout the past century. The sharpness of the attack intensified following the triumph of the Revolution in the USSR and the subsequent large-scale programme of collectivisation which transformed life and living in the erstwhile Czarist empire. The manifestation of the positive aspects of the stupendous new experiment in the Soviet Union coincided with a grave capitalist malaise marked by massive unemployment and shrinkage in output. This added to the discomfort of those who detested all forms of collectivist economic ordering. The defenders of the old order made it

an issue of either/or choice, and vulgarised it via the cliche of 'liberty-versus-serfdom'. The best known among the status quoists, the Hayek-Popper School, had a central focus in their arguments: socialism not only constricts freedom of choice of the individual through the settlement of economic decisions by fiat from above; it also denies society the bliss of welfare maximisation of the kind associated with the name of Pareto which characterises the free market economy. With competition absent, it is impossible for a socialist regime to optimise output out of given resources or, alternately, to attain a given level of output at minimum cost. The open society, in contrast, is as good as arcadia on earth since it allows the factors of production, including labour, explore the limit of their full creative potential and, at the same time, receive the maximum possible reward for their toil and trouble. An open society, in other words, leads to a state where output is maximised, in the sense that the economy was on the production possibility frontier and nobody was exploited by anybody.

To what extent are these assumptions borne out in reality? Consider the attributes which the proponents of open society claim to be the adjuncts of perfect competition. These include, among others, the presence of an infinite number of buyers and an infinite number of sellers, perfect mobility of all factors of production, perfect knowledge and instant communications. In the harsh world of reality, each of these assumptions is invalid. In a de-regulated economy where all controls are off, perfect competition is soon reduced to an altogether alien concept. The market might be 'free', but it is not perfect, neither the number of buyers nor that of sellers is infinite, entries and exits are not unrestricted or unregulated, and communication and the dissemination of knowledge are not without let or hindrance. The bubble of pretence that the votaries of the free market have made their stock-in-trade, therefore, bursts easily: free market equilibrium is hardly the state where social welfare is maximised and none can be made better off without making someone else worse off, nor can it be claimed to be the most efficient resource allocation mechanism. On the contrary, the so-called free play of market by continuous monopolisation of resources and opportunities accompanied by cartelisation of practically all forms of economic organisation.

Free competition is not perfect competition. Free competition, by its very nature, is unable to utilise all resources because the very logic of its functioning requires a reserve army of labour. Moreover, since its working leads inexorably to the institutionalisation of monopolies, it increasingly inhibits the drive to expand output. And where an economy is opened up to the free play of market forces in a universe already peopled with cartels, monopolies and multinational corporations, the result is a negation of growth, or the emergence of the phenomenon known as de-industrialisation. It is therefore bizarre that in countries such as ours, the withdrawal of controls and giving the nod

of approval to the unbridled operation of free market forces are being assumed to pave the way for maximising output and efficiency. Nothing could be more illusory. What is involved here is a double fallacy: first, a confusion between free competition and perfect competition, categories that are as different as chalk is from cheese; and second, the belief that free competition of the nineteenth century variety can be re-created in today's world of international monopolies.

Is it not ironical that where capitalism and so-called free market functioning have nothing to do with perfect competition, a socialist ordering of the system could in principle be made to simulate the working of a perfectly competitive economy? Few students of economics these days bother to look up the hypothesis put forward by Fred Taylor and Oskar Lange in the slim volume, *On the Economic Theory of Socialism*. Their formulation, buried in the two essays which constitute the volume, dared to dare on behalf of socialism. Collectivist economic planning according to them, could be so ordered as to usher in an ambience where the conditions defining perfect competition are fully articulated. It is a simulation system Taylor and Lange had in mind. The paraphernalia of planning could be deployed, they asserted, to satisfy the assumptions of an infinite number of buyers and sellers, thereby offering freedom of choice to individuals participating in the economic system both as consumers and as owners of the services of labour as well as to managers of production and of 'the ultimate resources outside of labour'. The end product of such a programming, they maintained, was bound to be what perfect competition would have yielded, namely, an aggregate social output which is maximum in the sense that no component can be increased without some other component or components experiencing decline; the overall output will consist of individual items the production of which is determined by prices set by the planning authorities in consonance with the subjective ordering of consumers and the objective reality of production relations.

Lange and Taylor proposed a methodology of trial and error, that is, a methodology of successive approximation of prices and corresponding demand and supply responses whereby socialist economic planning will ensure both the ideal allocation of resources and the optimum level of output as also a structure of income distribution in harmony with this equilibrium output; such an arrangement will *ipso facto* exclude the possibility of any form of exploitation of the factors of production.

Whether the Lange-Taylor mechanism which demonstrates through rigorous logic the superiority of the socialist system to free market capitalism, *can* or *should* be tried out as an actual planning mechanism, can still be a point of debate. No attempts were of course made to apply these postulates in any of the erstwhile socialist economies in eastern Europe; or elsewhere. There were undoubtedly practical constraints, both internal and external to experimentations of

this nature. Nor should there be any qualms in admitting the other fact; particularly in the decades following the end of the Second World War, while technological innovations were being rapidly grafted into the system, economic planning in the socialist polities got increasingly stuck in a groove. Be that as it may, the failure to try out an experiment along the lines indicated by Lange-Taylor does not *per se* undermine the basic hypothesis of a socialist paradigm reflective of perfect competition. The debacle of the socialist political system in eastern Europe certainly means the end of a chapter of hope. It does not however clinch the economic case against socialism nor does it refurbish the credentials of the free market economy. The free play of market forces, we know from experience, is unable to reach the economy either to the ideal level of output or the ideal structure of assets and income distribution implicit in the writings of Adam Smith and David Hume. At the same time, admittedly we do not know what new *real* problems will be associated with the process of the socialist *tantonnement* as presented by Taylor or Lange. To say that socialism is more amenable to simulating perfect competition than capitalism is important but albeit insufficient as a guide to socialist planning.

What is more, in real life simulating, perfect competition may not always be the best option available to a socialist economy. The compulsions of a social preference function can overrule the elusive charm of perfect competition. This becomes obvious from the Fel'dman model of long-range growth which served, at least at a certain phase of Soviet planning as a blueprint for basic investment decisions at the national level. Oblivion claimed it subsequently. But several of its alternative formulations will continue to have relevance for many poor, captial-short economies in Asia, Africa and Latin America on the assumption that they opt for self-reliant growth. The tidal wave of liberalisation-cum-globalisation has for the present put paid to all national aspirations which revolve round self-reliance. But the nexus between central planning, the optimum rate of savings and the goal of self-reliance which the Fel'dman model established continues to be of immense practical significance. It is almost an affront that the crumbling of the socialist edifice is adduced as a rationale for brushing aside this significance. One is infact tempted to add an aside: the unprecedentedly high rates of growth attained in the east Asian countries in recent years are very largely the contribution of centralised economic management.

LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

If the verdict must be that central economic planning did not fail, but was only shunted on to wrong rails, a number of further questions arise. Human history does not end with a particular conjecture. Societies will need to be shaped and re-shaped in future to answer the challenge of

the contradictions which will continuously come to mature. Socialism may have stumbled in some lands under some circumstances; that fact will not change the texture of objective reality in other lands and other times. As long as deprivation and exploitation dominate the social scene, those who are oppressed or under-privileged will learn to activise themselves. Given the goals and ideals motivating them to united action, it should not surprise if they instinctively turn toward socialism. The tragedy of eastern Europe will be for them an aspect of history to be taken into consideration. But once the current phase of insensate passion for liberalisation is spent, the realisation will dawn that the processes of the so-called market economy, with its stress on the primacy of private property, are inherently anti-egalitarian and exploitative. In contrast, socialism, if properly moulded and directed, can lead to an economic regime which is free of exploitation and provides the basis for enlarging the realm of human freedom.

Battles will be joined and struggles will ensue in societies marked by inequalities in opportunities and income and property distribution. In these interminable class wars, a core of leaders will be in the vanguard to take charge of the enormous task of social re-structuring following the success of their revolutionary endeavours. Since this restructuring will inevitably be along socialist lines, a collectivist economic arrangement will remain on the top of the agenda. It is altogether possible that, as in the case of the Soviet Union, the revolutionary leadership, and those succeeding them in the early phase of socialist reconstruction, will possess enough of competence, imagination and compassion. The overall impact of the working of the command economy is therefore likely to be beneficial, in terms of whatever criteria might be applied, to the overwhelming sections of the people. It is however, equally conceivable that history will repeat itself somewhat more specifically, and at a certain point, a hiatus of mind and attitudes develop between the leaders of the post-revolutionary administration and the masses. The socialist movement has to learn from the mistakes of history. It is therefore important that we do not shy from examining in some detail the roots of the problem which afflicted the Soviet political structure and ultimately led to its overthrow.

This particular ground has been traversed frequently of late; allegations and counter-allegations, have rent the air. The issue of democratic centralism has been the centrepiece of the debate. Heaping the blame, almost in entirety, on the supposed degeneracy in the application of the Leninist principle of centralism during Joseph Stalin's long years as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union has been the easiest of pastimes in this connection. It has been further argued that following a small break, the Stalinist tradition returned during the regime of Leonid Brezhnev and was the foremost factor contributing to the gradual rupture of communication

between the superstructure of the socialist political system and its base. The rest of the story, as per this version, is fairly unilinear.

Some of the accusations may be legitimate either in whole or in part, some others may have little objective basis. The massive programme of collectivisation, which Joseph Stalin initiated in the teeth of determined opposition on the part of several members of the Politbureau, was, it is altogether possible, vitiated by gross excesses. Some of these excesses were admittedly avoidable and the result of plain mistakes. A dispassionate analysis cannot however quite ignore the objective conditions obtaining at the same time the decision to collectivise was taken. The Soviet Union was still very much under threat from the Kolchaks and the Denikins, trade links with the capitalist world were by and large snapped, the very existence of the Soviet Union was beset by doubts and uncertainties. It is an open question whether, without rigid centralism, that crisis could have been easily, or at all, overcome. True, whether the manner in which the crisis was tackled was not responsible for thousands of unnecessary deaths and unnecessary suffering is not, even at this distance, an academic issue. It should be an obligation of socialists to learn from history; whatever genre of mistakes was avoidable one must learn to avoid in future. That does not still demolish the case for the Leninist principle of centralism. It is this principle which enabled the people of the Soviet Union to reach the heights of socialist valour, obliterate fascism from the face of the earth, and was instrumental for the liquidation of global imperialism.

Besides, Marxism-Leninism is not a picture of the still-life genre. It is a vibrant, dynamic compendium of thought and action which has changed once, and promises to change over and over again, the historical course. A doctrine which aims to promote human freedom in all its aspects should be amenable to dynamic interpretation and re-interpretation; it must have the capability to adapt itself to the task of interpreting manifestations of reality at different points of time. The problems which rear their head need to be discussed without recourse to innuendoes and whispers. Marxism-Leninism lays stress on the importance of candidness in all spheres of thought and action, including in the sphere of analysis of facts and objective conditions. When we say that in the Soviet Union and in the other socialist states of eastern Europe, the relationship between the apex leadership of the political movement and the base had strayed away from its basic coordinates in the Brezhnev and post-Brezhnev periods, we in a sense allude to the reality of a failure in the application of the Leninist principle of centralism. The most effective modality of proletarian mobilisation during the decades preceding the Revolution, which proved equally useful during the stage of the building of socialism, was rendered dysfunctional during the post-World War reconstruction of the socialist economy.

This much we now know: forms and procedures, which distinguish democratic centralism, either were not adhered to, or were ignored; essential signals failed to be given, or, if given, were treated with contempt. Should we not at least explore the possibility of these deficiencies being the result of the malfunctioning of centralism in the later stages of socialist reconstruction? Is it not equally important to review the history of the doctrine, discuss its strengths and weaknesses, and attempt to fashion it into an instrument which can meet the challenges of circumstances in all seasons?

To draw attention in this context to special historical situations may not perhaps be totally uncalled for. In the first decades of this century, before the Revolution became a reality, the Bolshevik Party was an underground organisation. Because the Party functioned clandestinely, it was necessary to guard against the danger of infiltration by hostile and alien ideology and *agents provocateurs*. It was also necessary to take care that the line of communications with leading cadres inside the country did not get inter-fered with by the Czar's men. The crucial importance of rigid central discipline at that juncture was therefore obvious. Any sloth in party organisation which allowed scope for factional squabbles being carried to excess in the name of democratic functioning had to be weeded out with an iron hand. The party was still an insurgency in the making. The party leadership had to be merciless so as to ensure that the insurgency was not still-born.

Controversy will crowd in even as the question is posed whether problems encountered in the two decades following the Revolution provided enough ground for the continuation of centralism of the most rigid type. The Central Committee and the Politbureau could not, it will be suggested, afford to waver in the task they had set for themselves. The Revolution was under attack, and the reinforcement of discipline had to be the overriding consideration. While the scope for debate and discussion remained at all levels, such disputations could not be permitted to be carried to interminable length, nor could such liberalism permitted to be used as an alibi for starting factions within the party structure.

Was not the objective reality however, qualitatively different from the mid-1960s onwards? Fascism was long vanquished, imperialism was in retreat, and socialism had triumphed in two-fifths of the world's land mass. The Soviet Union had emerged at the head of a powerful bloc of countries swearing by socialism, evoking alternately fear and respect in the rest of the world. Apart from the varied successes in the economic, social and cultural spheres, the Soviet Union had also emerged as the world's second most powerful military power, still enjoying a stupendous lead in space research while matching the nuclear capability of the leading capitalist nation. There was, it can be argued, little need at such a juncture to continue with the extreme

form of centralism unless it was for what can be described factional reasons.

This is where the original Leninist notion of democratic centralism emerges in a new light. In the long documentation, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward* written during the party crisis of 1904, Lenin took pains to explain the rationale of centralism in the circumstance then obtaining. The issue which had come to the fore was clear-cut: whether the central organ of the party could function independently of its supreme decision-making body, namely, the central committee. The party was operating from the underground, it was the party which was to guide and lead the coming revolution, it would have appeared as absurd to both the country and the rest of the world were the party to speak with two voices and ride in two different directions at the same time. The central organ had to conform to the wishes of the Central Committee, or the cause of the revolution was lost. The faction which held aloft the banner of the central organ, as if it had the inherent right to be an entity separate from the Central Committee, therefore had to be given the short shrift.

Consider a different situation though. Lenin had warned against the danger of factions forming within a revolutionary party. Suppose the context is changed, and it is the phase of socialist consideration. Those who occupy the leadership have come up through the *apparatchik* and are men and women of limited vision. They have managed to perpetuate themselves within the organisation through manoeuvres, but have lost all contact with the base. In other words, they too now constitute just a faction, and their links with the rank and file of the party and the movement are snapped, so much so that their appreciation of the objective social reality is both incomplete and perverse. The leadership, in other words, has painted itself into a corner, and is indistinguishable from a minority faction.

The party and the movement would need to be saved from the clutches of this faction. This would be impossible through usual processes since meanwhile democratic centralism had grown into a petrified mould. A self-seeking leadership, which either keeps renominating itself or nominating into the leadership its own pets, rules the roost. This faction, which has captured the leadership, speaks in the name of socialism but perhaps has long ceased to believe in socialism. Looking at the course which the subsequent career of individuals like Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin have taken, it would seem that a point had perhaps been reached in the annals of the Soviet Union where one could assume leading positions in the party even without believing in any of the tenets of communism and socialism.

Are we not entitled to draw some conclusions, howsoever tentative, from the foregoing? If in a particular phase of the socialist movement the social equilibrium resulting from the practise of democratic

centralism tilts somewhat toward the direction of centralism, could there not be other phases where it is equally important to encourage a tilt toward a greater exercise of democratic dialogue? How this equilibrium of intra-party regulatory arrangements is to be reached is something party ideologues and adherents of the movement would have to think about. All one can suggest is that such a reappraisal calls for deployment of an open mind. Leaders, ideologues and scholars whose views did not find acceptance in the past would perhaps need to be re-read and their thoughts evaluated afresh. The works of Rosa Luxemburg will, for example, assume a new significance. In the particular context where Luxemburg joined issue with Lenin on the fallibility of centralism, unquestionably she was wrong and Lenin was right. But amongst the early leaders of the international socialist movement, she perhaps had thought the longest and hardest on the issue of drafting democratic principles into the corpus of the dictatorship of the proletariat. She was anxious to ensure that in the name of proletarian dictatorship, the movement was not dragged into a blind alley where the dictatorship in effect is appropriated by a narrow faction. That was not the state of affairs in the Bolshevik party *circa* 1904 nor during the furious phase of socialist construction in the decade preceding the outbreak of the Second World War. One is not however too sure whether what Luxemburg had apprehended had not in fact emerged as the dominant reality in the Soviet Union by the mid-sixties.

That degeneracy has cost the east European people dear, even as it has severely damaged the prospects of the socialist movement on the global scale. Experiments must be on to evolve strategies and modalities which could help to avoid the repetition of past follies on future occasions. The core of Leninist discipline has to be saved, but discipline cannot be allowed to be used as justification for installing in positions of power those who are, objectively speaking, enemies of the people. There is an additional reason for such active experimentation with socialist praxis. Both in the wide expanse of the Third World and in the so-called capitalist democracies, a socialist movement will have to function in a milieu where reality is defined by the existence of multiple party systems. This will also be a world where the adherents of socialism will for the present find themselves on the defensive for no fault of their own, but on accounts of the debacle in eastern Europe. A party which denies itself the option of operational flexibility in the name of centralism will find itself on an awkwardly sticky wicket in such situations. The movement has to be, in its approach, both inventive and adaptive, luxuries which democratic centralism narrowly defined will not be permitted. A movement is always greater than a frozen doctrine, which in course of time tends to get blurred into insensate dogma. And it may become obligatory for the movement to liberate the doctrine from its state of frozenness.

That the policy of the principle, the devotees of the socialist dream have always admonished themselves, is what matters, the rest is chaff. The policy of the principle in the current period should be the restoration of the will to fight for the great cause of ushering in an exploitation-free world where nations and classes share equitably the fruits of economic and technological endeavours. The choice is clear cut. Socialism offers both a theory and a coherent strategy of growth whereas the free market system offers a perpetuation of exploitation, characterised by a staggering waste of resources as a direct consequence of monopolisation and cartelisation. An ambience which facilitates the dissemination of knowledge concerning this vital distinction is worth striving for. It is only in such an ambience that one can transform the supposed day after into a new beginning.