

How Socialism May Work

By Helen Bernstein

For years Marxists have temporized with the all-important issue of describing a Socialist society in terms of its specific political and economic attributes. But instead of suffering as a result of equivocation they have managed to turn evasion to their advantage. By converting their fatuousness into a stratagem, Socialists have succeeded in perpetuating their myth with hints about a rosy future, generalized vituperation directed against the "capitalist" system and its "bosses," and a host of confusing practices called "immediate action" intended to bespeak the cause of "progressiveness." These efforts have proved seductive enough not only to the chronically uncritical, but as well to many who should have known better.

However, since Stalin's discovery that Socialism, long threatening the Russian masses, had suddenly blossomed in their midst, there has been a clear need for a blueprint to fit the facts. And this is exactly the purpose of John Strachey's "The Theory and Practice of Socialism" of which "How Socialism Works," * is, in part, a modified reprint.

Mr. Strachey's task is not simple. He must devise a self-consistent theory which will simultaneously "justify" Russian Socialism in the light of pure Marxian theory, and modify this pure Marxian theory so as to eliminate the more glaring of the absurdities which have been exposed by the merciless logic of modern non-Marxian economists. The critical reader will not have to search far in Mr. Strachey's ele-

gant prose to see that he has failed.

The validity of Mr. Strachey's facts is not above suspicion. His chief source of information about Russia is "Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?" by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, whose sources in turn are the data issued by the Soviet Government. This fact is perhaps less interesting than the bureaucratic cast of mind which the Webbs reveal in their own writings. (See Max Hirsch's "Democracy versus Socialism" for a neat analysis of this point.)

Mr. Strachey's most difficult task consists in the refutation of the arguments of such economists as Ludwig von Mises, whose critique of Socialism emphasizes principally the mathematical impossibility of calculating the indefinitely expanding and varying desires of men by the artificial device of a planning commission. It is interesting to note that Mr. Strachey in his mention of von Mises refers with corrosive irony to the fact that the latter, in his classic criticism of collectivism, "Socialism," ignores the actual existence of a system of planning in one-sixth of the world. Such a rebuke is most extraordinary since this book, published in 1922, developed from an article published in 1920. As this work was in the writing during the years of civil war and War Communism, and as Mr. Strachey himself dates the beginning of planned production in Russia in 1928, the omission was not nearly the wicked, bourgeois trick Mr. Strachey would have us think.

Strachey proposes to master the problem raised by the Austrian eco-

nomist by gauging the approximate desires of the population with the aid of two devices: first, estimating what people have consumed up till now; second, estimating the consumption of that section of the population which is "comfortably off," that is to say, neither the degenerate rich nor the undernourished poor. Once having ascertained what people consumed and in addition what they would have liked to consume, the planners would allocate the factors of production toward the production of the required amount of food, shelter, clothing, education, medical attention, etc.

The argument seems reasonable enough until we begin to analyze such terms as "food," and "shelter," and find them meaningless in the light of even the present level of consumption. There is no such thing as "food." There are only the almost innumerable varieties of meats, vegetables, breads, fats, etc. Even the term "bread" is meaningless when we think of the many varieties of white bread alone. The planning commission would consequently be charged with the unenviable duty of calculating the quantity of land, labor, and capital to be devoted to the production of each commodity, as well as the incomes to be granted to each member of society. In addition, given even the best productive technique imaginable, the planning commission would have to decide what would be the most economic use of each factor of production. For example, assuming the need for wheat and for a distributing agency, for what purpose shall the corner of 42nd Street and

Times Square (supposing that this area were good wheat land) be used? In a free economy, the market mechanism would soon demonstrate that growing wheat on Times Square would be uneconomic, despite the fact that wheat could be produced there. Under Socialism, due to the elimination of the market, it would be impossible to answer this question. Even if we endow the planning officials with the highest social motivations, we cannot intelligently suppose that they will have mathematical insight on the superhuman scale which such calculations would require. Rather it would be less unreasonable to expect that, overcome by despair and confusion, they would resort to the peculiar asceticism which Socialists unhesitatingly impose on others when confronted even theoretically with

problems of this nature.

Given the authority of bayonets it becomes far easier to compel reconciliation of men's desires with an authoritarian plan than to devise a project which would reflect these desires. It is for this reason that every collectivist scheme must degenerate swiftly into a dictatorship; and however the reigning tyrants may gloss their actions with "idealistic" phrases, however noble the experiment may be made to sound by appeals to Stoic sacrifices in the name of a "brave new world," however prominently may be displayed the utopian end-goals which rouse the sympathies of all of us, there are only vestiges of man's pattern of hope for mankind on the one hand, and on the other, the tricks and technique of holding political power. In any case, the basic fact remains

the same: men's desires are forced into a mold in conformity with the will of "planners"; less euphemistically, men become slaves.

This little book is undisguisedly addressed to Strachey's social equals in America and Great Britain. It is extremely doubtful whether the newly literate Russian peasants have acquainted themselves with this author's entertaining description of their land pictured as flowing with milk and honey. Bookworms in the Soviet Union are given harrowing accounts of starving Americans and English workers with which to solace themselves. One imagines with amusement the surprise which these two groups of readers would betray if they were permitted to look over one another's shoulders.

* *How Socialism Works*, by John Strachey. Modern Age Books, N. Y., 212 pp. Price 50 cents.