

# A Farewell to Marx?

by SYDNEY MAYERS

ALTHOUGH the circumstances surrounding the sudden ouster of Nikita Khrushchev as chief executive of the Soviet Union remain somewhat mysterious, one aspect of the event has become quite clear. Whatever may have been the back-stage machinations which culminated in the portly shoe-pounder's retirement, it is evident that the area of discontent among the USSR's hierarchy was economic, and not merely political.

Khrushchev's successors have acted quietly, but with remarkable rapidity. Within weeks, what had been basic Soviet policies were abandoned, and new economic measures adopted. Whereas the ex-Premier's policy was to revitalize segments of the economy in turn, one by one, the Kosygin-Breshnev regime put into effect efforts to bolster the entire Soviet economy at the same time. But of greater interest are proposals that have caused many a raised eyebrow: higher wages to workers, bigger returns to farmers, lower prices for consumers; more attention to world markets and to the needs of Soviet citizens!

It may or may not be pure coincidence that the recent political changes in the USSR happen to coincide with the emergence of a new breed of Soviet economists. These are younger, less "conservative" men, whose realistic approach to economic problems is "radical" by Bolshevik standards, and whose recommendations cannot be found in the pages of *Das Kapital*.

Already it has been proposed that production be based on a profit incentive system, replacing the old method

of centralized planning — and this proposal has received surprisingly sympathetic reaction. Now we learn that the Soviet government, in order to reduce excessive stocks of consumer goods (most of it outdated and of poor quality), is opening discount stores, where cut-prices will aim at increased retail buying.

In addition, we are informed that the cooperative housing program has been greatly revised, so that it will offer better apartment designs, more suitable plots, higher quality construction and easier payment terms. Generally, the current policy seems to be to produce on the basis of consumer demand, rather than on that of arbitrary planning at lofty echelons, far removed from the market-place.

The swing away from orthodox Marxist state-planning is pretty obvious. Some observers believe this indicates a "turn to the right," which is probably wishful (and rather wistful) thinking. Soviet spokesmen scoff contemptuously at any hint that the USSR is drifting toward capitalism. But there is no doubt that, as has happened in the past, the Soviets do not hesitate to employ "capitalistic" methods to rescue communism when it faces serious economic difficulties.

"Free enterprise" as we know it is, of course, only relatively "free" — but even a little freedom goes a long way. If the Soviet Union is learning this fundamental economic lesson, it may be a good sign. Perhaps in time the whole world will learn the facts of economic life, and take the Georgist road to a truly free economy.

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I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

— Thomas Jefferson