

# The Great Questioning

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... How has it come about that after fifty years the pioneer of socialism has become an obstacle to the further development of socialism itself? We do not, of course, attempt an answer here, but in its 12 years, *Outlook* has helped chart the process. One of our first publications was Deutscher's "Russia in Transition", an essay on the historical evolution of the bureaucracy whose distorting grip on Soviet society had just been dramatically exposed by the Khrushchev report of 1956. Last year we reviewed his *The Unfinished Revolution*, which argues that the social pressures within Soviet society in the technological age must bring demands for new forms of political democracy that cannot be indefinitely held down by a managerial elite with no entrenched property basis to give it the power of self-perpetuation. Between those years, the concept not only of the monolithic socialist state but of the monolithic unity of socialist countries had been split asunder; and at least on one interpretation, the Chinese revolution claimed to have turned against the very institution of bureaucracy itself, and its tendency to establish a stranglehold on socialist as on capitalist society.

The Czech events have sent not only socialists, but many others who find that they expected something better of a socialist country, searching for historical causes, and that is valuable. But more immediately, they pose the question: What is socialism *for*? The sacrifices of the early Bolsheviks were not made for the greater glory of Stalin or the Politburo. If socialism is not for the dignity of man, then it is nothing. One of the tragedies that must be offset against the gains of fifty years of Soviet society is that the concept of socialism, into which has been

poured so much creative thought and energy for well over a century, has been narrowed down to a matter of bread and circuses—or moon-probes.

By its very nature, socialism must engage the full capacities and imagination of those who create it, or it withers. The present crisis reveals sharply how completely, in the process of degeneration, it is not only the oppressed who are betrayed, but the oppressors. All the evidence is that large sections of the Soviet people are as alienated from their society as many of us are from ours. Deutscher wrote a few years ago: "We must restore the image of Socialist Man to all its spiritual splendour"; this means recognising that the ultimate responsibility of the socialist is not to countries, not to political parties, not even to shifting social classes, but to *human beings*, with all their varied needs of body, mind and heart.

And what of Australia? Czechoslovakia is the nearest example we have of social change in a country with an established capitalist economy and an experience of capitalist democracy. As Eleanor Wheeler reported from Prague in our last issue, the Czech reformers warned against nostalgic glorification of the First Republic. From our cushioned existence among affluence and apathy, there is a danger here too that the monstrous acts of the USSR will lead those who have recently begun to question the values of our own society to retreat to the security of the private liberties allowed by contemporary capitalism. But we do not think it is great. The new radicalism generated by protest about Vietnam and civil rights which now adds "Russians—go home!" to its placards has already taken a hard look at the society about us, and still finds private affluence but public squalor, private liberties but public crimes against humanity. Capitalism does not change its spots because Soviet tanks rumble through Prague.

It is not all over in Czechoslovakia; but it has been all over for a long time for the old facile view that the 'Soviet example' provides the sole model of social change for the world's oppressed. A new round of questions is already faintly discernible in the 'socialist sector'. Having 'won power', what then? Power for whom? What are the safeguards against the development of an encrusted bureaucracy, and in what ways can the creative capacities of a people be engaged in the most demanding task of all, the building of a new kind of society? It is a tragedy for the Russian people that having suffered so much they must now receive the odium of the world, and will be the last to benefit from any new thinking that is going on among socialists.

In the West, questions of the same kind are posed by the radical protest movement and the student revolt. This may provide some basis for a merging of interests between traditional socialism and the search for human values in a technologically-developed society.