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CHRISTOPER HITCHENS INTERVIEW

In this interview, writer Christopher Hitchens describes the rise and fall of socialism in Great Britain against the backdrop of the Cold War.

What was it about socialism that first attracted you to it?

My motives, in short, would have been a dislike for the class system and for the attitudes that it instilled not in its victims but in the people who thought they benefited from it -- a suspicion of those who felt entitled to inherited privilege, of whom I was not one, and; an intense dislike for the British conservative party. That was the impulse. There's a big difference, as I'm sure you know, it's a slightly manneristic one, between people of the '60s and people of '68. Being a *soixante-huitard* -- it's so nice to have a French word for it -- is very different from just having happened to been a baby boomer in the '60s. That's the difference between myself say, and Bill Clinton, I suppose. What I was signed up for in '68 was what I thought then was the beginning of something. But I now see was the end of something. I took part in what was actually the last eruption of Marxist internationalism. We really thought that year, there was going to be a revolution. Well, indeed there was revolution everywhere from Vietnam to Czechoslovakia.

I joined a small but growing post-Trotskyite Luxembourgist sect. Well, not a sect actually. It was a faction called the international socialists. I gave a good deal of my life to that before realizing that in fact the '68 upheaval was the last flare-up, the last refulgence of this and not the beginning of a new wave.

In the abstract, why has socialism been so appealing to so many people over the last 150 years?

This is not in his rather beautiful essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, but Oscar Wilde does say somewhere that a map of the world that doesn't have a Utopia on it isn't worth glancing at. And I don't in fact think that that's true. And I wouldn't have thought so at the time. Utopianism was a word we used rather in disparagement. But, there is in human beings an ability to see beyond existing conditions or to always ask why they are the way that they are and to conclude that it's not because of God or nature that some people are rich and some are poor. Some are free and some are not. And believe these are very substantially manmade conditions and can be man-unmade. And, the idea therefore that the market is smarter than you is something that very many intellectual types won't accept. It can't just be that we are the objects of a blind process. So there's a will to do this, a reaction to manmade injustice. And a refusal to be consoled by the eternal argents, most of them preceding from religion that well, that's just the way things are or that's the way that human nature is.

It's impossible, I think, however much I'd become disillusioned politically or evolve into a post-political person, I don't think I'd ever change my view that socialism is the best political moment humans have ever come up with. So a lot of credit belongs to the socialist movement for being able to see that far and

imagine that much, and to risk and dare as much as they did and we would still be living in a better world in other words if the socialists forces had won that year.

We begin our story with Robert Owen, who comes to America and founds New Harmony to create a “Heaven on Earth.” Can you tell me a bit about the intellectual history of this? When did people start talking about the idea of a “Heaven on Earth”?

Well the idea of utopian brotherhood and ideal community where there are no antagonisms between human beings, where there's nothing to fight about is a very old one and it goes back in myth or semi-myth to the slave revolt of Spartacus. English terms, which are the ones I'd suppose I know best, the peasants revolt of 1389 where the slogan was taken from the Bible, which is the only book everyone had in common, it went, "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?" In other words, humans were born free and equal and thus it was decided only later and only by humans who was to be boss. The opening words of Rousseau, "man is born free but everywhere in chains"; some of the work of William Morris, the myth of a golden past; it's very common, very strong also in the Protestant revolution which becomes the English and I think eventually the American revolution, too.

Marxism rather despises that as mere idealism and says no one has to take the forces and relations of production as something that brings about progress. We don't want a vanished agricultural Eden where you have to share everything because there's very little to go around and where there's no real development in human society. No, and to the contrary, Marxism succeeded in the way it did because it thought capitalism was a brilliant idea.

So how did the ideas of the Enlightenment give fuel to the idea that one could create the things religion once promised, but in a secular sort of way, on Earth?

The enormous dynamic and creative, as well as destructive energy of capitalism which is written up with more praise and more respect by Marx and Engels in the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* than probably by anyone since. I mean I don't think anyone has ever said so precisely and with such awed admiration how great capitalism is, how inventive, how innovative, how dynamic, how much force of creativity it unleashes.

Well, implied in this is the view that for the first time ever in history there might actually be enough to go around. That this would be possible, that machines could replace drudgery and in the end obviate the need for exploitation at all. So, that the struggle would be not of man against man, but of man to master nature, and that this was not utopian because the actual wealth was there, being created before their eyes. That's why the socialist movement took off, as a vindication of materialism in the minds of the working class. They could see from the mansions and the empires and the great ships and railways that there was no need for them to be poor, there was no need for them to go on making things they were too poor to buy.

So to close that gap in perception was the project. And of course to leave behind such remnants of feudalism that had survived into the capitalist system, such as the monarchy, the nation-state, the church, rubbishy cobwebs from the mental attic of prehistory. As I say it now -- what a brilliant idea.

Do you believe socialism became a feasible substitute for religion somewhere along the way?

Well, there's a big argument over this and I take one side of it very firmly. Marx despised moralism very much, and used it as a term of abuse. For him, it was a matter of objective reality. You know, we ask for these things because they are feasible and because we're entitled to them. We think the workers should take over capitalism. So that it would be capitalism but it wouldn't be privately owned. The profit of it wouldn't be appropriated by the owning class. It's a matter of the education and growth and development of the workers within the system. Morality doesn't come into it. That's how he liked to think and he liked to argue with his utopian or idealistic rivals, but of course the impulse of it is ethical. Why would you care otherwise, particularly if it's inevitable? If it's going to happen in any case, why bother to write advocating it? So there is a contradiction there. And of course it is an attempt to replace and discredit the religious impulse to show people where their yearnings really do come from, to tell them not to trust the priests or the supernatural. And also above all, not to believe in the false promise of an afterlife where wrongs will be righted and misery cured.

How would you trace the idea of science and human endeavor being able to replace religion to the Enlightenment?

The Marxist worldview has a relationship to the Enlightenment. I think that's impossible to doubt. You can find a great deal of Marx actually in the work of John Stuart Mill. I'm not confident enough to say how much Mill Marx would have read. Some. Certainly he would have been familiar with him, but Mill had complete contempt for organized religion of course, and for faith and superstition. He had an idea that society was hierarchical by class, and that ideology, as he said, is always the ideology of the ruling class, something that Marx could easily have said. He could see many of the injustices such as the British system in the Caribbean and elsewhere were the products purely of greed and exploitation. They weren't part of the natural order. The same thought that Mill gives this expression to can be found in what I think is the last letter written by Thomas Jefferson where he says that to the contrary of monkish superstition, we are not born, some of us with saddles on our backs, and others with boots and spurs to ride us. None of these things are given.

So these thoughts of enlightenment and of course the admiration of enlightening people for science and for reason and technique in everything from medicine to navigation -- these are the precursors the Marxist, Victorian-era critique.

What is the main message of Marxism as expressed in the *Communist Manifesto*?

The essential contention of Marxism is that anyone who says “the economy,” is stupid. To redo a well-known recent saying “it's the economy, stupid.” If you say “the economy,” you show you're stupid. There's no such thing as the economy. There is not a unity between the forces of production and the relations of production. So, you could condense the whole of the manifesto and three volumes of *Das Kapital* into that - the forces and relations of production are not the same. The ability to mine coal and to use that to make iron ore into steel is something that is socially in common. It's collectively done. And the mobilization for it is social but the profit goes to a small group of people, so the product of it is not shared. Thus to speak of this as an industrial revolution or a new economy is false. It's just a refinement of old patterns of exploitation for modern purposes.

You could do without this class and the same amount of production could be done. Or indeed, more could be done because there'd be no need for scarcity.

How do you get from capitalism being this great thing that is very productive to a revolution and post-revolutionary world where socialism is on the rise?

Well, having described how the rise of the industrial bourgeoisie has destroyed feudal property relations, has made old religious superstitions redundant, has broken up with Marx called the idiocy of rural life, the millennial stagnant village existence that so many millions of people have been born into and died out of without even knowing that there was any other kind of world possible, that all this energy and excitement came at a high price - it was very exploitative. It required people perhaps to lead much less happy lives than they had before, much less secure lives, much more risky lives, with a very much higher rate of exploitation and that this, in the long run, would revenge itself upon its creators, that they, in their turn, would rather conserve their own power over the process than allow it to develop further. That having unleashed it they would try and fetter it and these fetters would be broken by educated and emancipated workers movement who would use the same techniques and the same discoveries, but adapt them for social use rather than for private enrichment.

That was the theory and it was a pretty exact-word picture of the living experience of many, many millions of people at that time. You can read it in the novels of Zola; you can, to some extent, read it in the novels of Dickens. The people are suddenly living in a much richer world but their lives are much poorer. But the solution is to hand. They must enfranchise themselves, they must demand the eight-hour day, the slowing of the pace of exploitation and they must recover the imagination necessary to seize control of it for themselves so that for the first time in history, people are the subjects and not the objects.

What would society then look like, for the ordinary people?

Well this is how you can also prove that Marx's ostensible dislike for moralism and morality was a bit of a pose, because he had I think a rather clear

idea of what a good life would be like. In essence it would be the abolition of specialization, that people wouldn't be condemned as they had been under feudalism. People were told that you have to stay with this craft or this guild all your life. That got blown apart to some extent by capitalism, and by the protestant ethic. People would have time for leisure, time for art, time for the cultivation of their minds, as well as the improvement of the health of their bodies, where they wouldn't look upon what they made or were forced to make as their enemy. In other words, they wouldn't be alienated. They wouldn't be forced to be making things that were later used in a sense to oppress them, with a guarantee of their powerlessness. That was as far as anyone could see. I mean Marx was not a utopian in the sense he wanted to design an ideal society for you, and then try and get to it as the Jesuits did in Paraguay, for example. Because, most of the utopian community ideas actually are religious. They're based more on the idea of the monastery than the commune.

[Marx] didn't want to do that. He didn't want to "compose the music of the future," as he put it. But that was what he thought would be the end of alienation. The communist manifesto begins very famously by saying that the history of all previously existing human society is the history of class struggle. And it goes on to say what phases that went through. Roughly speaking, there have always been the rulers and the ruled. There have been periodic revolts but sometimes the rebels didn't have enough in common to do more than mount a brief kind of peasant insurrection and then fade back into obscurity or slave rebellions of antiquity, the names of only one of whose leaders we can even remember, Spartacus. All these other people apparently lived, worked and died of their work for nothing.

Marxism reviews this and says we're now at a stage where a revolution wouldn't just instate a new ruling class, as say the French Revolution of 1789 did [but] that the next ruling class will be the last because it will abolish class society all together. And this is not a dream anymore as it was in antiquity and as it is in poems and in some prayers. It's a human possibility. It involves the transcendence. Not the abolition of capitalism, but the transcendence of it by those whose solidarity and education and development the working class has created.

We interviewed a Russian journalist who said, "Socialism sounds desirable but it always leads to either failure or a concentration camp." Do you think there is something to that?

A good friend of mine called Basil Davidson, a British officer and a leftist, also a socialist, who was involved in the Second World War in working with the European resistance in the Balkans, largely, but also in Greece and in Italy, once wrote that having seen what occurred in Nazi-occupied Europe, he no longer believed the old line that you can't change human nature. You can change it for the worse very easily. So if you can change it for the worse, why do we give up on the idea you can change it for the better?

I think the socialist movement, by removing many, many people from grinding stagnation and poverty and overwork, does enable people not just to

lead better lives but to be better people. I think that the same can be said for the emancipation of the populations of the colonies from colonial rule; and yes, conditions can be created in which people are more civilized. I think the socialist movement can claim a lot of credit for that. But there is always the danger, if you proclaim the “new man,” that you will have to use an inquisition as a means of conditioning people. In other words, a state of terror, or a concentration camp. Or that you'll just create, as in Cuba for example, where the new man was very much hymned, a rather stagnant, boring, unimaginative conformist, despite the fact that the idea is everyone should, in Cuba, emulate Ché Guevara. In fact Cuba is a very backward country.

About coercion, do you think some of the literary utopias along the lines of Plato, Thomas More, Edward Bellamy anticipate the unpleasant elements of a socialist society?

The preceding utopias that we have knowledge of, Plato's Republic and Thomas More's Utopia, and later more Victorian-type era practitioners like Edward Bellamy, to some extent Robert Owen and William Morris, are all based on an idea of a very small society probably rural, not very densely populated, not much in the way of industrial or technological ability. And in the case of Plato, of course where it's not enough to live in the city to be a citizen. And there's a whole class left out, [a class] of slaves.

That, I think, should have tipped people off to the futility of trying to design an ideal society. Especially one that was complex and involved things like a division of labor and the mastery of machinery and the creation of new wealth and the feeling that society should always take the risk of being dynamic, organize itself to be unpredictable because new experiments and new technologies would outpace the ability of most humans to keep up with them.

That's the brilliance of capitalism in a way. It says, you know, we have an idea of which way we want it to go, but I mean we are always running the risk that a huge amount of investment in capital will have to be thrown away and liquidated. Yes, we'll take risks with the environment. Yes, we will build things that are almost too big for us to control.

As Lenin tried to transform Russia into a socialist state, did he leave any of the old government intact?

Lenin's Russia was an attempt to start from scratch. The war had already pre-destroyed a lot of the old order for him. It had destroyed the Czarist army for example, turned it into a rabble, which the strongest element, the strongest element were mutineers who already supported the Bolshevik party. It had crucially undermined the autocracy, the Romanov dynasty. And I think it had very much discredited the Russian Orthodox Church, for which he had a particular dislike. But he was very willing to finish those jobs, all three of them, to wipe out the Romanov family, to rebuild the army, and under Trotsky's leadership of the Red Army, and to seize the opportunity to confiscate church property and to dissolve, as far as possible, the influence of the church.

One of Lenin's great achievements, in my opinion, is to create a secular Russia. The power of the Russian Orthodox Church, which was an absolute warren of backwardness and evil and superstition, is probably never going to recover from what he did to it.

The difficulty was that he also inherited, and partly by his measures created, even more scarcity and economic dislocation. The Bolsheviks had studied what had happened to the French revolution and they knew there was a danger of autocracy developing in their own ranks, and they were always on the look out for another Bonaparte. And the person who most looked like Bonaparte to them was Trotsky, who had flamboyance and military genius and charisma. And so they often didn't trust him. But the person who least looked like a Bonaparte was a mediocrity from Georgia, a pockmarked, mustachioed, rather unintellectual fellow, Joseph Vissarionovich Djugashvili, Mr. Stalin. They thought, well actually, he's probably quite a reliable guy.

Goes to show that what people learn from history is that they don't learn.

How did the people of America react to the prospects of a Bolshevik-style revolution on our soil?

In United States, well, there had been a socialist movement led by Eugene Debs, who by 1917 was in jail. He'd been imprisoned by Woodrow Wilson for making an antiwar speech and this movement which had at one point got him more than a million and a half votes in a presidential socialist campaign - it was not very many, but it wasn't bad for the time. [There] wasn't universal franchise quite then, either. His votes were very heavily concentrated among largely Jewish immigrants from the Russian empire, who brought a lot of the socialist ideology with them and were based very heavily in New York, Chicago, and sort of prairie-populist, agrarian-socialist types in the countryside. Because of the overwhelmingly foreign-born nature of the left, and the Marxist worker's movement, it was very easy for the American establishment to represent the Bolshevik challenge as something imported and un-American and to deal with it, to a very good extent, by rounding up and deporting a lot of these characters, representing it as something cosmopolitan and alien. Indeed, a lot of the propaganda against Bolshevism at that time, including the propaganda of Winston Churchill during his armed intervention in Russia, was exclusively anti-Semitic.

But was there a fear of Bolshevism in the U.S.?

Well it was sometimes called the Red Scare, sometimes is still, in the work of modern historians. It's mainly associated with something called the Palmer Raids, Attorney General Mitchell Palmer, and his then unknown young deputy J. Edgar Hoover, who decided after a number of incidences of violence to do a round-up. They moved at dawn to arrest many, many thousands of people in their beds and to announce that a great conspiracy to bring down the United States had been aborted and to put people very much on their guard at the idea of an enemy within. And the American left never really recovered from that.

I might just add though, that if anything qualifies as an irony of history it would be this: that Marx and Engels throughout the nineteenth century wrote about America the United States as the great country of the future, of freedom and equality and a good life for the working man, and a country of revolution and emancipation, and of Russia as the great country of despotism, backwardness, savagery and superstition. Henry Adams, in his memoir, *The Education of Henry Adams*, recalls with pleasure and admiration the work that Marx and Engels did for the Union. That when he was Lincoln's ambassador in London, he was almost isolated by the forces of British conservatism and Marx was one of the very few willing to organize real material help as well as propaganda help for the American Union. He was a huge admirer of Lincoln, who predicted and called for the Emancipation Proclamation. They don't teach you this in school. But that was what Marx thought about America as the great country of the future and of Russia as the great den and pit of the past. That gives one some sense I think of the scale of the irony and in a way also the tragedy of the failure of the socialist movement.

How did the British economy fare under Labor's policies during the 1960s and '70s?

Things seemed quite prosperous. You know, suddenly young people had money to spend. There was fashion and luxury and the term "the affluent society" really caught on. And Britain had been very, very grey indeed in the years after the Second World War. I remember it myself. I was born in 1949. The cities were still recovering from being bombed and they were dull and dirty and boring and poor. And then suddenly this color and efflorescence. But what it concealed was the fact that the economy was essentially dying. That Britain that had had the first industrial revolution and the first modern empire, the one that Marx anatomized so brilliantly [and] it's losing both of them. The empire's falling away. There isn't enough money to keep it going. The cost of the Second World War, the hidden cost of it was enormous. The country had basically gone into debt. The pound, which used to be worth something like four dollars when I was a kid, starts to slide and we're not really producing very much anymore. We were living on the credit of the past on old, declining, rusting industries like coalmining, shipbuilding, and steel and nobody knows where the money's going to come from now on. So it was a kind of false paradise.

Was this the fault of the Attlee government?

Well, it was [during] the Attlee government, many of its ministers who had been an important wing of the Churchill government during the war, [when] most of the decisions on social welfare and the welfare state were taken, when the country had a more natural feeling of solidarity. [The government] seems to have decided after 1945 that the British had been through a lot. They'd been through the slump of the depression and they'd had a war, been bombed and half-starved and so on. That it was time to sort of pay back a bit and featherbed them slightly perhaps. So there's national healthcare of course, and then a lot of declining industries are taken into public ownership which conceals perhaps from the view

the fact that some of these industries like digging up coal or building big ships weren't going to last very much longer. That there's going to be a tendency to want to protect them if they're in public ownership. And then [there was] the failure to engage with the European common market, now called the EU. Both British political parties essentially decided to abstain from taking part in this experiment in free trade so that there was a protectionist, backward-looking element to British society in spite of these superficial, rather Americanized actually, symptoms of prosperity. There's a book by a historian called Correlli Barnett, called *The Audit of War*, which takes a rather stern view of this and says that all of that was the fault of postwar British Laborism. [But] in fact, it was a national consensus from the Churchill government that it was time that the British working class [get] a bigger share of the social product. More was going to be spent on distributing wealth and providing welfare than on production and innovation.

Margaret Thatcher and her allies started making arguments connecting Britain's economic ills with Labor policies. How did she articulate her position?

Mrs. Thatcher evolved her critique of the two-party consensus in Britain, I think, originally more as a patriot than as an economist. She just couldn't bear the idea that British decline should be taken for granted. That we should just accept the fact that we were no longer a world power economically, industrially or imperially and that it was just a matter of the orderly management of this decline. She rejected that with her guts. She thought Britain should be great. Searching around for what was wrong with the unionization for example, of so much heavy industry; the domination of closed-shop trade unions and agreements with employers to keep on too many workers and all of that. She found herself being offered copies of books by F.A. Hayek, that had been tried by the Tories and dropped in 1945, and Milton Friedman, who actually came over to talk to her. She decided that what the economy needed was a dynamic shakeout, was to make people self-reliant again, and above all, to break the power of the trade-union movement, which had been thought sacrosanct in Britain. These were the workingmen who'd been our soldiers in the war and helped to rebuild the country and should be treated with reverence. She said, "No. Let's try not doing that. Let's try making them stand on their own two feet." That's where it begins.

One of Thatcher's contemporaries, Ronald Reagan, approached the socialist empire of the Soviet Union differently from his predecessors. How did his attitude shape the rest of the Cold War?

The accession to power of Ronald Reagan, which happened to come at around the same time as a shift to the right in other comparable societies - the Malcolm Fraser government was elected in Australia around that time and the Thatcher government in Britain certainly invigorated the American right with her victory in 1979. All of them had in common, not just Reagan but also Thatcher, the view that Soviet power, the apparently unshakable edifice of the USSR and its eastern European dependencies, needn't be taken for granted, that its survival

was not a given, something that even a fairly conservative cold warrior and hawkish person like Henry Kissinger believed. In Kissinger's dealings with Brezhnev, he dealt as if for keeps. I think undoubtedly the eruption of the *Solidarnosc* worker's movement in Poland and other related developments in China, which seemed to be moving on its own towards a free-market system, made it easier to present this as realistic as well as principled policy. Why assume that they're going to be our rivals forever? Why not see if we can outbid them, and even subvert them? And I don't think anyone believed that it would be as easy as it turned out to be. And if one is apportioning credit, I think a great deal has to be awarded to the fact that the Soviet Union, in fact, was not as monolithic internally as it had been presented for the Cold War, and that the emergence of someone like Mikhail Gorbachev had been in the cards for a long time. Certainly, that had been predicted by Marxist and leftist critics of the Soviet Union, the two best of whom were both German. Rudolf Bahro, an East German who wrote a book called *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*, which came out, if I'm not wrong, in 1979, predicting the collapse of the eastern European regimes. And a wonderful essay by Hans Magnus Enzensberger, a West German Marxist called *Communism: The Highest Stage of Underdevelopment*, with deliberate borrowing from a title of Lenin's, [says] that it could be seen that this system was a failure in its own terms, understood by its intelligentsia and by some of its managers as having totally stagnated, believed in by nobody and ripe for collapse.

So, it's quite possible, in other words, that the Soviet Union might have imploded if Jimmy Carter had been president. But it seems churlish to deny that Ronald Reagan's attitude to it hastened the demise. And also, convinced even the hardliners in the Soviet leadership, like Yuri Andropov, that the game was pretty nearly up.