

SECOND THOUGHTS

On Politics and Culture

By CHARLES HUMBOLDT

A FREQUENT complaint voiced about political writing is that the author usually insists on reviewing the entire world picture before he can get to his own corner, however modest. Anyone commenting informally on the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party and subsequent developments stemming from it finds himself suffering from just the opposite defect. The perspectives are at once so vast and so intricate that the writer hardly knows where to begin and where to stop. If he cannot decide, he may, as I've done here, simply jump from one part of this brave world to another.

If we start with the achievements of socialism—for that is how Khrushchev's report begins—we are confronted with one enormous fact: the transformation, within thirty nine years, of that economic and social "experiment" into a world system can no longer be in dispute. The apologists of capitalism can no longer claim that its productive forces alone are geared to ending the servitude and satisfying the needs of the peoples whom it knows only to oppress. Meanwhile the accomplishments of socialism are being woven into the fabric of daily life of literally hundreds of millions. With enormous rapidity, it is being revealed to other millions as fully equipped to overtake and surpass the capitalist economic and social order. While a relatively few fear this outcome, the majority of the world's peoples look to this system with hope and exultation, for it promises to bring about the liberation of all mankind and the release of undreamt productive possibilities and almost inconceivable human creative forces.

NEVERTHELESS, it would be shamefully complacent of us to make opportunistic use of these decisive considerations in order to turn aside from the disquieting revelations which have clouded over the brilliant landscape of hope. We have never, and do not now, accept the

jesuitical and vulgar-pragmatic interpretation of the concept that the end justifies the means. To say that we repudiate all non-human morality and that heeding Lenin's phrase, we shall use the best means we know to "help human society rise to a higher level,"* is very far from condoning injustice at any time and for whatever reason.

A word of caution. Since the leading personalities who shared roles in the happenings which are now coming to light (through their own revelation of them) have not yet described in detail their reasons for behaving as they did, the enemies of socialism are raising a rancorous clamor for immediate clarification. Such "honest" anger is pure hypocrisy. Those who have always kept their cautious mouths shut at legal murders committed under their noses, and those who were accomplices in the murders, have not earned the right to demand explanations of anyone.

BUT some friends, too, have allowed themselves to be swept away by speculations and rumors, from the probable to the most fantastic. They do not want to be calm; they want explanations not only of facts which have been given them but for matters which are still withheld. That the circumstances under which the terrible events took place must be projected by those who took part in them is not in question. Otherwise, self-criticism would be meaningless, an admitting shrug of the shoulders before one passes on to other business.

Every answer, even the best possible or most plausible, which we may give to questions concerning what happened in the Soviet Union, Hungary, or wherever else, is vitiated by its being based on utterly insufficient knowledge. Therefore, even the most earnest and hard-thought-out reasoning on these matters must have a taint of presumption just as the most impatient questioner must have a touch of the dilettante no matter how earnest the query and how well-meant the answer. What can be said of and by the Left in the United States is another thing. But this much should be noted at once. The discussions now taking place in the pages of the *Daily Worker* answer those who stated, both *a priori* and after the appearance of the freest correspondence there, that the Left intended to suppress any expression of opinions which might shake its solidarity. For all these expressions of the most divergent points of view, alternations of confusion and confidence, bewilderment and cool-

* Speech delivered at the Third All-Russian Congress of the Young Communist League, Oct. 2, 1920.

headedness, depths of disillusion and attempts to come to grips with the complex realities that face all of us, all these letters and editorials prove that the leadership of the Left does not shudder at the voices of people, even when they rise to a shout.

NOW, does the sheer weight of the evidence still to come deprive us of the faculty of having any ideas about what has already transpired? I think not. We do know that many innocent people, both ordinary devoted individuals who never wavered in their loyalty to the working class as well as men of long service to the revolutionary movement, were humbled, silenced, imprisoned, their usefulness hampered and destroyed. A smaller, but not small number were physically annihilated. Some of these, like Rajk, were apparently forced or induced to conspire in their own murder. The crimes against the Jewish people have horrified us all. Naturally, everyone is asking: how did this come about? To say that we do not know is not to avoid the query that nags at us, too. The desire for an answer cannot be stifled, and therefore the accounting must come from those who are best able to give it. It must come for the sake of the moral prestige of the only movement in the world which has as its aim the liberation of all mankind.

The cry for such an accounting is not just a concoction of the enemies of socialism. It is the wish of those who yearn for the advent of socialism. It must be satisfied, for otherwise millions will be tugged at by doubts that will cast shadows even over the greatest achievements of socialism in the coming years. To dispel these doubts therefore becomes as urgent a task in the realm of human values as the fulfillment of a great economic plan would be in the sphere of production.

For it is not true that the nature of the productive relationships takes care of everything. If that were so, the founders of scientific socialism would have given themselves carte blanche for the making of blueprints of the future. We fight for socialism not because it automatically guarantees, let us say, the virtual disappearance of crime, but because it provides the conditions without which crime cannot be abolished. Many of us naively used to discount the possibility of juvenile delinquency or mental disturbance, other than of gross physical origin, in the Soviet Union. We were sure that the definitive defeat of capitalism there had put an end to such phenomena. We know better now. But we have not yet learned the deeper lesson: that even under socialism

unceasing self-examination, that is, ethical as well as organizational vigilance, is a sine qua non of political integrity and unity.

Oh, some friends will say, you are subordinating the basic political reason for what has happened, namely the "cult of the individual," to subjective considerations; you are "psychologizing." In other words, you are superficial.

NOW, first of all, the evaluation of subjective forces is not itself subjective. It is a standard procedure in science. In medicine, for example, if we did not take into account the elimination of the symptoms of angina pectoris by the administration of placebos (a thirty-five percent record), we would still believe that this dreaded syndrome was a disease entity and not a sensation stemming from some seventy odd physical causes and some psychic ones.

Secondly, it is no argument against one explanation of a fact to say that it is not "basic," that because there are deeper, more fundamental reasons for a given phenomenon, any tentative reason lacking the force of a final settlement has no validity. The science of biology is not discredited because it is dependent upon the science of chemistry, and this in turn upon the science of physics. Nor is the fact that psychology is rooted in physiology as well as in the social structure (and therefore in the mode of production) deprive it of its right to exist as a distinct field of inquiry.

The cult of the individual cannot be divorced from those who were responsible for its creation, nor from those who condoned it. This is a truism, but it seems to need repetition for those who believe that we are "simplifying the issue." We can only answer that simplifying an issue is better than avoiding it. Are we then to ignore the organizational background and, the objective circumstances (capitalist encirclement, treason within, fascist aggression, imperialist plotting) under which the cult arose? Of course not. But there are some who, having posed the problem in this fundamental way (and I do not, of course, use the word, fundamental, ironically), seem to have exhausted their powers of analysis; secondary causes make them uneasy. And so they reason in a circle: the practice of the cult of the individual, in all its monstrous ramifications, is accounted for by—the cult of the individual! This is not to say that the cult of the individual has not come to be a theoretical issue. The striking phrase, long hidden away in the store of Marx' almost casual prophetic

insights, has become an unfortunately unforgettable chapter of history, demanding the same serious study as its opposite, the theory of collective leadership.

One cannot account for what has been revealed to us in the past few weeks if one views the cult of the individual as a fixed cause. It is a framework which had to be built, and within which the emergence of repugnant negative personal traits could be nurtured. It was also a veil hindering the perception of obvious wrongs. If such a state of affairs were not altered, there would be no action so inexplicable that a rationalization could not be found for it, no crime which the awe of persons could not help to explain away. It would be presumptuous at this moment to fill in the present picture with one's fantasies; we are not obliged to create an imaginary drama if others are in a position and disposed to raise the curtain on the real one for us. But this much can be said:

For some years since the death of Lenin, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, as well as other Communist Parties, have tended to see political theory and action too narrowly, ignoring the truth contained in the maxim of Gottfried Keller, the 19th century Swiss novelist and champion of democracy and of realism in art: "Everything is politics." Apart from other connotations, does this not mean that we cannot, in our political thinking, ignore even the most complex aspects of human behavior or the examination of motives as well as their social consequences? That we can never tire of delving to the roots of men's actions, and that we must be prepared for anything? It was not just because he had seen his father's ghost that Hamlet said:

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

The apparent neglect of the element of character in all its ramifications in Soviet political thinking has been very costly. In contrast, the Chinese Communist Party has in its writing and practice devoted careful attention to human behavior and its motivation. Therefore it has been most successful in applying Communist morality, a political morality, to the achievement and consolidation of freedom. The writings of Mao Tse-tung and Liu Shao-chi are witness to this unremitting concern for ethical integrity in others and in oneself. How moving is Mao's quote of Lu Hsun, reminding men of the need to "bow your head willingly and work like an ox for the youth!"

SOME people compare this ardor for social and private virtue to the self-abasement and fanaticism of the old saints. (Many such critics have been known to join the hue and cry for a spiritual revival until it pleases them to accuse the Communists of turning Marxism into a religion.)

Now, whether such an opinion is delivered with malice or in good will, it must be said that Marxism can never be a religion nor a philosophy of abstract self-abasement. Its aim is not personal salvation through divining and obedience to the will of God. Its morality is entirely human, having as its aim the liberation and happiness of all men. It is not ascetic either, for it holds that the satisfaction of material and cultural needs is indispensable to the accomplishment of that aim. Why have the Chinese studied so intensely the countless devices which enable men to avoid responsibility, justify arrogance and intolerance, give rein to the desire to punish others, be virtuously inflexible in the face of situations that require pliancy and understanding, use righteousness to disguise their contempt for those who are weaker than themselves, in short, to all the abuses of office? Because only through the vigilant uprooting of old, insolent habits—the heritage of the pre-revolutionary bureaucracy—combined with the inculcation of democratic discipline, were the Chinese leaders able to arouse the creative enthusiasm of their more than half a billion people for the incredibly swift building of a new society.

WHAT—since this is, among other things, a cultural magazine—has all this to do with culture here in the United States? A great deal. I expect at this moment to take note of only the smallest part of it. The dissatisfaction which many workers in the arts and sciences have felt with the premises and practice of the Left cultural movement did not arise from recent hints at a re-evaluation in the Soviet Union with respect to many negative features in this field. (Just as the readers of the *Daily Worker* did not wait for a rallying call to open discussion, in order to send letters expressing the most diverse points of view.)

It must be admitted, however, that during the entire period during which the events occurred which were the subject of discussion at the Twentieth Congress, much of the discontent stemmed from the conviction that the Left had made itself harmfully dependent upon the pronouncements and positions taken on aesthetic questions by Soviet thinkers, writers and artists. Instead of courage in thinking, we began to ob-

serve the dreary spectacle of certain intellectuals carrying over their arms the ideological handouts of others, like old clothes to be brought home for refitting. Worse yet, our critics often descended to praising works they did not care for.

Was this slavishness? No, that supposes an absolute lack of principle. What actually happened was that the critic felt he had, for the time being, to put aside a lesser principle in consideration of an imaginary greater one. Thus, the need to make objective judgments became subordinated to the attempt to sponsor "healthy trends." Since the reader or spectator had, however, first to read the poor book or look at the untalented picture before discerning the "healthy" direction in which it was supposed to point, the critic succeeded only in arousing distrust in his judgment and suspicion of his honesty.

That all this was done in good conscience did not improve matters. Worse, it bred cynicism toward any principled criticism whatsoever, so that now one constantly meets people who tell one: "All I ask for is to enjoy myself. I don't want to be bothered analyzing that book (or play, or painting, or concerto)." We have become thankful for anything that warms the cockles of the heart, even if it is a graceful defense of the status quo or what a friend wittily calls "a masterpiece of irrelevant realism." Any dried out old piece of horsemeat passes for sirloin: a tenth rate musical for Mozart, the clowns of art for Velasquez or Cezanne, the case of Bridey Murphy for the work of Kepler.

AN EXAMPLE of our theoretical trailing was the uncritical way in which we employed the term "socialist realism." We reached such a state of calcification on this question—which requires the most careful, and sympathetic re-examination—that an author, sitting down to write a satirical novel might actually doubt that he had the right to begin; was it really a socialist realist venture he was embarking upon, and, if not, should he continue? And because of the lack of discussion of this valuable concept, no one could even suggest a common-sense answer: if the theory could not embrace a form like satire, then it was not worth its weight in feathers.

What might be called a side effect of our disquiet in the face of native thoughts was the creeping advance of an official style. Usually, the writer—and few of us are guiltless—would mimic a poor translation of some Soviet document, giving the effect of a hippopotamus charging

through a pool of molasses. Often, too, there ran through our pages a current of rudeness and abuse unworthy of intellectual discussion. All sorts of bad motives were attributed to our opponents by ad hominem arguments lacking in proof.

Most serious, though, was the slow silencing by implied censure or neglect, of many talented artists, and indifference toward any critical efforts to encourage them to continue working under the heavy stresses of economic insecurity, lack of recognition and political terror. For lack of competence I shall not speak of scientific thinking, but here too we can recall instances where only one of two positions—neither of which had been tested to the degree which true scientific method calls for—was given adequate outlet in our press. For this among other reasons, the publications of the Left have not, with few if splendid exceptions, reflected its intellectual potential, the high level of its thinking in the arts, in science, in philosophy. This is the picture we, all of us, must change.

Writers, and by implication, all artists, have been called "engineers of the human soul." But to move this soul, this mind, one must first know it. Art is, first of all, a form of knowledge. If political thinking is to encompass the baffling happenings of the recent past, it will do so with the aid of those sciences and arts which, each in its own way, probe the working of the mind. If they cannot perform this function, then they do not reflect reality, and these glittering toys are useless. But no Marxist believes this.

We have in the past criticized certain writers for viewing revolutionary thought as somehow subordinate to their own humanist vision. The Maltz case is an example. We were right then, but only in small part. Had we permitted our political life enough latitude to embrace humanism, instead of attacking it for having limits springing from its class origins, we could have shown that Marxism, the continuer of humanism, provides a much broader view of the world and of man. We would have known better how to advance that great tradition, of which socialism and, finally, communist society is the realization. If we find the way to show the American people that our conception of the future is linked to the liberators and decisive moments of our common history, the lessons of the past few weeks will not have been lost.