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# Has socialism a future?

Sean Matgamna and Roger Scruton

*Sean Matgamna*

WHEN, RECENTLY, I debated with Professor Kenneth Minogue, one important point he made against me was this: if you pin down a socialist about a particular regime in a particular country you invariably get the reply: this was not real socialism. Minogue made the point that it is very hard to know what we are arguing about. Ours is an idea which is never realised and therefore can never be criticised. On a certain level that is a reasonable point to make. So I will try to define what I mean by socialism.

Obviously, socialism is one of those words with a vast number of different meanings. Hitler was a socialist in his own designation, so was Clement Attlee. So was Ben Gurion. So was Nasser. What follows is that they cannot all be socialists. The people I mentioned are to a high degree mutually exclusive. You might try to find some socialist "essence" shared by them all — statism or whatever — but it strikes me that the word is so vague that it is best to start out by defining it. I understand it in terms of the ideas that Marx and Engels developed. According to Marx, socialism will grow out of capitalism, as capitalism grew out of the womb of feudalism. Socialism is being created inside capitalism by the spontaneous socialisation of production that is a natural part of capitalism, which ultimately spurs a rationalisation on a political level: the social property, now capitalist-owned, would become collectively owned social property. According to Marx, this socialism would differ from all previous socialisms, because it was based not just on a wish for an ideal, a perfect world, but on the natural development of our existing world. Socialism was the necessary outgrowth of advanced, developed capitalism.

Throughout history — and Marx was keen to admit this — ruling classes have emerged for particular reasons. Ruling classes have played progressive roles. The Communist Manifesto is full of praise for the bourgeoisie because capitalism had developed the means of production. Throughout history ruling classes have been necessary, because human beings have lived in a world of scarcity. That is the root of the class struggle. According to Marx capitalism had created, or was in the process of creating, a situation where there was no need

for the struggle of classes, no longer a need for some people to rise to the top and create some sort of civilisation on the basis of exploitation. Marx said socialism came out of advanced capitalism. This was Lenin's view also.

So why did Lenin — who insisted that socialism was not possible in backward Russia — make a revolution there? Why did Lenin and Trotsky make a revolution in a country where, though it was politically possible for the workers to take power there, socialism was not possible because the country was so backward? Lenin saw the Russian revolution as the first of a chain of revolutions in which the workers would take power in places like Germany and, eventually, America. The Bolsheviks did not see the Russian revolution as a socialist revolution in the sense that in Russia it was possible to create a better world than the world of advanced capitalism. The revolution was socialist only in so far as it was the beginning of an international working-class revolution.

This is fundamental. When Marxists insist that what happened in Russia from the 1920s on was not socialism, it is more than a way of saying that we do not like it — we are saying that it was an historical abortion, an historical cul-de-sac. If you look at what Lenin and the Bolsheviks said, nothing but an abortion could have been expected according to the bedrock ideas of Marxism. An historical abortion is what Lenin and Trotsky said would happen if the workers' power in the old Tsarist empire remained isolated. They did not foresee Stalinism. They expected that an isolated Russian workers' state would be overthrown by bourgeois forces. But they said in advance that socialism could not have been the result of the October 1917 Revolution unless October was the beginning of a series of victorious proletarian revolutions. And it was not. Socialism is the seizure of power by the working class in the advanced countries. It takes as its starting point the best that capitalism has achieved. From this point of view Russia was not socialist, and could not be socialist. I am not repudiating the revolution. We defend and stand by the Russian revolution. But the revolution was defeated by a bureaucratic, Stalinist counterrevolution — that is, a counter-revolution made by the state bureaucracy who came under the sway of the scarcity and backwardness which has dominated human history. The Stalinists created a totalitarian collectivism which most people take to be socialist. From the Marxist point of view, Russia was the opposite of socialism. In many ways it was further from socialism than the advanced capitalism we have in Western Europe is.

A second way of judging what real socialism is, is this: what does an alleged "socialism" mean to the working class? Did the workers rule in Stalinist Russia? No! Were the workers better off in Russia than in, say, Britain? No, they were not. I repudiate the idea that statification is socialism. Stalinist statification was the very opposite of socialism. All the conquests of the last few hundred years of human history — human rights, the slow spreading downwards of civilisation — were wiped away. They were not disposed of by socialism but by the Stalinist bureaucrats, behaving as ruling classes always do, in material conditions as backward and primitive as they were in the USSR. Therefore, the collapse of Stalinism does not mean the collapse of socialism. On the contrary.

For decades, the notion of socialism, which I have broadly defined, has been encrusted by a series of ideas which are alien to socialism. There are no shortage of quotes. James Connolly, for example, commenting on middle-class socialists like the Fabians, put it sharply: if state property is socialist property then the jails and enterprises like the Post Office are all socialist institutions; and the jailers, the hangmen and the police are all socialist officials. "Socialism" has long been encrusted with all sorts of statist ideas alien to socialism. Not all these ideas have come from Stalinism. During the last hundred years a collectivist wing of bourgeois liberalism — in this country in the past represented by the Fabians and the Labour Party — has grown up. These people also want statification. For example, Bismarck's state was the first attempt at a modern welfare state. He was not a socialist.

I want to take a different tack. We can all — Tories included! — agree that Stalinism is a bad thing. We will disagree when it comes to defining why Stalinism was a bad thing, what exactly was wrong with it. Socialists believe that there should be collective ownership of the means of production — I mean the basic means of production, rather than every single property — on the basis of a political democracy. Only on the basis of collective ownership of the means of production can there be a real, self-determining, self-controlling democracy. From this point of view, what was wrong with Stalinism? Stalinism could be seen as a grotesque caricature of every society which ever existed. A state with unbridled power beat down the people. The state had such power that it could turn over the lives of tens of millions of peasants, wipe out millions of them, turn natural calamity to its advantage, and artificially intensify famine, as in the Ukraine, to break the peasants.

That state dominated the population in the interests of an elite. The elite, unlike the British elite, did not have private ownership of the means of production. The state had ownership of the means of production — but the Stalinists "owned" the state. You had exactly what you have in this country, in a different form! Stalinism had too many points in common — taken to a ridiculous caricature — with countries like Britain for people of Roger Scruton's persuasion to have a right to say: "That was the socialist future, and it did not work". It was the past of human history, the history of class society, encapsulated and intensified!

In Britain there is a ruling class which controls the lives of the people, not in a totalitarian fashion, not by direct force, but nevertheless for goals similar to those of Stalinism, and with immense powers of repression in reserve. Stalinism, in this respect, is only a grotesque caricature of what exists in Britain. In the Stalinist states, for example, education was formally accessible to the entire population, but in fact was semi-monopolised by the bureaucracy and their children. Exactly the situation that exists in Britain. Only the mechanisms of control differ. Now Mr Scruton would think this is a good idea, or something you have to live with because there can be nothing better. Socialists want neither Stalinism nor the system that Mr Scruton champions! We believe that we live in a world where objectively it is possible that elites can be dis-

pensed with — whether they are Stalinist elites or British Tories and the class they represent. We believe we live in a world where it is now possible to realise democracy. Although capitalism has been progressive, and did create possibilities for human beings that have not existed before, capitalism has raised possibilities that it cannot realise.

Democracy is perhaps the clearest example. Democracy is necessary because the mass of the people cannot be liberated unless they can rule themselves democratically. The various political formations which developed capitalism — in Holland, Britain, France and America — put forward the idea of democracy. But at the very best this has only been realised in part, realised fully only for a section of the population. For example, in this country democracy is only a rough approximation to what democracy should be. It is not real, self-controlling political democracy. It is obviously better than that which exists under Stalinism. But there is not real self-rule in Britain. If you are an elitist you believe democracy is not necessary. Desirable or useful, perhaps; necessary, no. But democracy is necessary if you believe in the rights of the vast majority of the people, that is, if you are a socialist. In capitalism there is only formal democracy and formal equality: formal equality before the law where some people are a lot more equal than others because they have property, and therefore, in fact, massively greater rights.

Without qualification, it is good that there are formal rules. The rule of law means that, most of the time, there are certain rules and certain rights. This is good and worth defending. Democratic socialists will defend these conquests of the people and achievements of bourgeois society (they were often achieved through mass action). We will defend these democratic gains against people like Mr Scruton! Nevertheless, those who are serious about liberty and democracy must realise that capitalism has failed to deliver what is possible. Right now you have a situation in Britain, after ten years of Thatcher, where a vast number of people sleep in doorways in central London. Capitalism has the possibility to create a real abundance on the basis of real self-rule. But what do we get? We get the rule of savages! This is a savage system. An elite rules on the back of the mass of the people and exploits the people. The bourgeois intellectuals act as sheep-herders of the people, defending the official ideological lies which lubricate the rule of the moneyed in the interests of the moneyed.

I do not know if Roger Scruton would say this, but certain critics of democracy from the right say that there are inbuilt features in bourgeois democracy which inevitably make it a system of lying. I think they are right. This system needs to lie. "Democracy" is its official ideology, in some ways now its religion; but democracy — real self-rule — is not its day-to-day reality. It is to a serious extent based on falsification. It has to be. It can only survive on the sort of trickery we have seen lately where the Tory government has, in the last few days, exempted students from the council tax because students form a sizeable part of a number of key marginal seats. This is blatant bribery! Our political world is comprehensively corrupt. It must depend on lies because it cannot deliver the democracy it promises, or be what it says it is. Within British democracy we

have the actual rule of the minority through their control of the means of production.

Socialism says: this is wrong. Socialists have said that for 2000 years. Marxist socialists say it is now unnecessary. We do not need it. The people who do need it are the ruling class and their intellectuals, who defend their system and accept its unavoidable spiritual and cultural corruption. This is what it comes down to. One of the most awful things about modern Britain is the cultural exploitation and degradation inflicted on the people by some of the tabloid papers, for example. Stalinism's fall changes none of this! And the collapse of Stalinism allows real socialists, at least in the medium term, to be more likely to receive a hearing.

For a long time it was a legitimate response to ask socialists: what do you think of Russia? Do you want to create a Russia? That is no longer a question which, after this current burst of bourgeois triumphalism dies down, will dominate political life. So, the short answer to "Is socialism dead?" is no, because capitalism is not dead. Socialism is a reaction to the realities of capitalism that I have talked about. It is a reaction rooted in the class struggle of the workers; and that struggle will go on as long as capitalism goes on.

One of the reasons why people in Britain now ask "Is socialism dead?" is because for ten years the workers have been defeated in the British class struggle. We have been defeated before. There have been downturns before. The labour movement will revive! It may revive initially by way of the election of a Labour government and what happens afterwards. When it revives, the possibility will exist for the spread of a renovated socialism, a socialism which has purged itself of the statist encrustations taken from bourgeois liberalism and Stalinist totalitarianism. Socialism will revive. Despite the pressure socialists feel now, and all the fashionable talk about the "bankruptcy of socialism", what we are seeing is the beginning of the rebirth of socialism. Roger Scruton knows that, I think, and he fears it.

*Roger Scruton*

MR MATGAMNA was eloquent and forceful, covering a great deal of ground. I can not reply to everything he said, but when he spoke of "the cry of triumph" from the bourgeoisie which we have been hearing for the last ten years, I thought of my own childhood. I asked myself, not for the first time, whether I am a member of that class or not. When he spoke about the ruling class, in my father's accent and with all the venom with which it was said to me when I was a child by my father, I once again ask: do I really belong to that class? The answer, of course, is that I do not know. I thought then that I heard a voice from my own past, from my father, lecturing me, as he always did, on the injustices of the English class system. How he himself had been a victim and how I was destined to be a victim too — not having the money and the opportunities which only the upper class could enjoy. I have always borne in

my heart the little thought that I am a member of the proletariat after all, despite all the accidents of circumstance which have followed. It is with that authority which I speak to you.

I do not accept the title of this debate, in the sense that I do not accept the phrase "collapse of Stalinism". What I think has collapsed in Eastern Europe at least, and in the Soviet Union too, is Leninism. I agree with Ken Minogue, insofar as I understand what Ken Minogue said to Mr Matgamna in a previous debate, that the roots of the evil we have seen are not in the personality of Stalin, but they go deeper into a project which Lenin himself introduced into Russia in 1917. This project has been introduced into many other parts of the world, by others unconnected with Lenin, and almost always with the same results. I am thinking of Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot and a whole series of other people whose names perhaps one should not mention quite in the same breath as Lenin, but nevertheless had the same project in mind.

I am not sure whether socialism has a future. But I do believe that there is something else which does have a future which I want to define before beginning. This is: the leftwing attitude. I do not want to disparage it because I think it is a part of human nature, it will always exist. I was brought up in a family in which it was dominant. I would like to say, psychologically, what I think this attitude is, and why I think it will persist. I believe it is founded in sympathy for the underdog. Everyone recognises that there are people who lose out. The sight of them losing out is always heartrending and in decent people it gives rise to the question: what shall I do about it? The easiest thing to think in the light of this experience, of seeing people lose out, is that the underdog is a victim of the "overdog"; that wherever there is an underdog there is also an overdog that is doing him down. The *ubermensch*, or *uberhund*, rather. This overdog is a person who gets the good pay-off, the successful member of society, perhaps someone like myself, who, having started out in life as an underdog, has now enough money to drink a bottle of wine with my dinner. So, if one can believe that the fate of the underdog is somehow caused by the overdog, one has a political programme unfolding before one. Namely, to get rid of the distinction between underdog and overdog. Somehow, by whatever means, introduce a condition of equality, so there is no underdog any more, because there is no overdog ruling over him. Equality, then, becomes the primary goal.

Now, of course, one simple way of making everyone equal is to deprive everyone of everything. It is no exaggeration to say that this was the method adopted in the Soviet Union under Stalin. Almost everybody, as Mr Matgamna rightly said, not the elite who were doing the depriving. But even they were unsafe. From day to day they risked falling into just the same trap that they had built for the rest of mankind. Even Stalin himself never felt wholly secure — and rightly. So, we all recognise that there are ways of aiming at equality that threaten us all. I would simply say, without arguing for it, because this is a debate about other things, that I believe that the goal of equality is unachievable and that it would not be worth achieving if you could achieve it. I actual-

ly think, and Mr Matgamna rightly accuses me of this, that elites are necessary. They are also, in my view, the peaceful by-products of human society. They are not necessarily the evil and repulsive things that he believes they are.

I want to talk about the future of socialism, in particular this “left-wing attitude” that I have identified. It is obvious that the idea that the misery of the underdog is caused by the triumph of the overdog has a peculiar tenacity — not just intellectually. It has survived ever since the French Revolution, and of course had its origins long before that in medieval thinking. It is not just an intellectual tenacity, it is a moral tenacity. People believe that if you deny such rights you are condoning the situation of those who lose out. You are part of the machinery of oppression which has caused them to be sleeping in that tin shed in Lincoln's Inn Fields. As a result, as all of you know, it does become very difficult to be open and honest about this very matter. If you are open and honest and say human equality is not achievable and not desirable, you can be the target of abuse. It is thought morally wrong even to think this. However, in my view, this is self-evidently true, as long as you clear your mind of the emotional need to think the opposite. This emotional need will survive because of human sympathy with the situation of those who lose out. I believe one should have that sympathy. But one should not take it to the extent of destroying the possibility of elites emerging. Because, in my view, it is only by the emergence of elites that the situation of everyone gets better. But elites have to emerge in the right way. Not by imposing themselves on others, but by the process once called by Adam Smith “the invisible hand”.

Marxism, to which Mr Matgamna gave a very neat and elegant introduction, appeals not just because it conscripts this feeling of sympathy for the underdog, but for reasons he stated: it seems to give a scientific account of how that condition arose and how it will be bettered. It will be bettered by the natural processes of history, passing through capitalism to a socialist future. As he rightly said, that socialist future turned out after 1917 to have been betrayed. Well, he would say betrayed, I would say that was what it actually really was. At least it was not what was expected. Ever since 1917 people on the left have been exercised by what happened in Russia. They have wanted to explain it in a way which would enable them to maintain their own system of beliefs. The usual way out is the way out taken by Mr Matgamna, namely, that this was not real socialism. It was not real socialism because it was taken over (in his language) by a counter-revolution of Stalinist bureaucrats.

Now, I am not a historian, but I think if you were really interested in what went on in 1917 — most of you have socialist leanings, you ought to be — you should read the book by Heller and Neffs, *Utopia in Power*. It will prove to you, if you have an open mind, that the things that are normally blamed on Stalin had been consciously initiated by Lenin. In particular, the founding of the Cheka, which was to have all-encompassing power over the social processes. That is the sort of thing which was the most sinister development of the Russian Revolution. But it happened before Stalin and it happened in Lenin's thinking as part of the process of seizing power from the remnants of the bour-

geoisie — from people like me, I suppose. Now, people on the left ought to feel some conscience about this. As I have said, the left-wing attitude is natural, and will always remain, but it is also necessary to feel some conscience about what has been done in the name of it. If people like myself start saying of any particular conservative or reactionary regime which you disapprove of it was perhaps not real conservatism, you would all be, rightly, disapproving. You would say, come on, take some responsibility for things done in the name of your philosophy; show how you would separate yourself from it. You must give concrete historical detail and show you are aware of the evils and the dangers.

If anything should be learned from Stalinism, as Mr Matgamna called it — what I refer to as Leninism — it is that, whatever the future of socialism, whatever it is that you socialists think you should be doing, you must look at the past and take some responsibility for it. At least for having sympathised with it, for feeling it is going along the right lines. See how things went wrong and how you, seriously, would avoid the errors. I believe that many on the left, in Britain at least, have gone through this examination of conscience. I feel people, on the whole, agree about certain conclusions about the Great Socialist Experiment, as it was called.

First, and I think Mr Matgamna would probably agree with this, most people are sceptical about centralised planning. But their scepticism, I believe, does not go far enough. In particular, we should ask ourselves the question as to why centralised planning was thought of in the first place. It was instituted by Lenin as an instrument for equalising people, for destroying that old class structure and giving opportunities at the lower end of society. Is centralised planning in itself wrong, or is it only wrong when it is not used for the purpose of equalising people? If you can plan to equalise, how far can your planning go? What liberties would you allow yourself to trample on in order to achieve human equality? This is the real question I think all socialists — or rather all those with the leftwing attitude I have described — should ask themselves.

Most on the left have come to see that state control in itself is not a good thing. As Mr Matgamna said, what socialists, and in particular Marxists, have always argued for is not for control of the economy by the state but rather something else — collective ownership, what the 19th-century Marxists used to call social ownership, ownership by the people, not by the state. The problem, I think, is that the onus falls on you to define just what you mean by that. Is, for example, a modern capitalist form, in which the workers can all acquire shares, social ownership or not? I see, from vibrations on my left, no. This is the kind of question you need to discuss. Just how do you bring it about? At a certain period people thought Yugoslavia was an ideal of social ownership, one that combined social ownership with a market economy. No-one would want to wish the destiny of Yugoslavia on the rest of the world. But also, the economic and social facts of Yugoslavia do not give a good record to that type of socialism either.

Let me say one thing further. I do not, again, want to give a definite view

because it is for you in your hearts to decide. Mr Matgamna said that for him the idea of socialism was collective ownership, not state ownership, but ownership by the people or workers, based on political democracy. This raises for me the major question which all socialists have to confront in the post-Leninist world. Suppose it came to a choice between socialism, or collective ownership, and democracy — which way are you going to go? To the people who constantly manifest their desires for something which has the form of a capitalist economy, do you tell them that they are wrong and that their votes will be cancelled, or do you go along with it and accept the result? I think this is a paradox? All socialists I have known, not only my own father, believe that their doctrine, if understood, would have the spontaneous consent of all the people. But suppose it had the spontaneous dissent of all people, what then? Which way do you go?

Nevertheless, as I say, the left-wing state of mind will remain because it comes from a force in human nature which is a force we should try to understand. My own view is that it is a type of residue of religious feelings surviving into a secular age. But these are feelings which all of us share to some extent. The socialist way of conscripting them will always be with us. But what are the lessons which must be learned from the collapse of Leninism? The first, and the most important, I think is this.

What Lenin did in Russia was to destroy all the Russian institutions which made it possible to recognise their mistakes and to correct them. He destroyed parliaments, he destroyed law, he destroyed open discussion and opposition. This process was initiated by Lenin and brought to fruition by Stalin. But it is only through these sort of things that people can come to see that they have made a mistake and take measures to correct it. In my view the greatest mistake that humanity can make is to destroy the means to rectify mistakes. That is the mistake which was made. Therefore we must remember that we need institutions which enable us, collectively, to come to see where we have gone wrong. That means we need parliaments, above all, legal opposition and free opinions.

Another point, and Mr Matgamna agreed, the rule of law really matters. Lenin in November 1918 issued a decree on courts which abolished the entire legal system of the Soviet Union. All the consequences which we see flowing from that are too horrendous to relate. We know that, whatever else we do, we must maintain the rule of law — a continuous structure of legal authority and impartial courts, insofar as we can achieve them. All human institutions are imperfect, and there will always be mistakes, nevertheless, just to abolish law is one of the primary errors of revolutionary socialism in the Leninist mould.

Another lesson we should learn, although I think Mr Matgamna would disagree with this, is that private property is a primary right of the individual. I do not know the Soviet Union very well, but I do know Eastern Europe. I know from the experience of my friends there that the one thing that would have helped them more than anything else was the right to be able to shut their door in someone's face, particularly the face of the secret police. The right to have

that piece of territory of your own. Without private property it seems to me there is no such right. Private property is the thing that gives someone control over his own life. Whatever else we think about the revolutions of 1989 the demand for private property was at the heart of them. And anyone who knows Poland and Czechoslovakia will recognise this. You might think people were wrong to demand that right, that there is some ideal socialist world where it would not be necessary, but in the actually existing situation private property is one of the best institutions which has ever evolved, to protect us from the bullying of others.

Another lesson which you should draw from the collapse of Leninism is slightly more philosophical. It is: human institutions are more easy to destroy than to create. In destroying them you do not always know what you are losing. It was very easy for Lenin to destroy the rule of law in Russia, to destroy the principles of a free economy, to destroy all the old academic institutions, the Orthodox church and so on. All these things crumbled immediately. You only had to breathe on them. But what came in their place? In my view, nothing, organised nihilism. A moral, political and spiritual vacuum in which only power could reside. I believe we should learn that lesson. We should remember that, even if we want to reform things — and reform is very different from destruction. Until we understand the function of an institution — be it parliament, a school, a university, or whatever — we should not arrogate to ourselves the right to cast it down. We should try to find what it does and try to reform it in the direction we want.

Finally, the last lesson from the collapse of Leninism is that they ought to inform themselves a little bit better about the history of our century and what has actually happened. Many, many millions of people have paid with their lives, freedom and happiness to the Great Socialist Experiment. It is not good enough to wash your hands of it, you must understand what went wrong. Mr Matgamna talked about bourgeois democracy which, apparently, we all live in, as a system of lies. But I suggest that if you really want to know what it is like to live in a system of lies you do a bit of reading about the systems that actually obtained in Eastern Europe. I am not talking about the Soviet Union, but about Eastern Europe. These were capitalist economies which should have developed into socialism, and which the Communists were only giving a helping hand to, after all. Read Vaclav Havel's essays and come to see just what it means when truth is completely marginalised in everyday life. We can have this discussion. At least it helps us to clear the air of unnecessary lies lying too long in our opponent's conscience. In that part of the world, until 1989, such a discussion would have led to the arrest of all the people in this room.

I think that when history is examined it is much more complex than the simplified schemes that appeal to you because they seem to make sense of it. One of these schemes was given to us by Mr Matgamna. A Marxist scheme where history proceeds from feudalism through to capitalism, on to socialism by necessary and logical steps. In which, until the final stage, there is always a ruling class against which the rest are struggling. I think this is all myth. If you

look at our country and the rule of law which he says the workers struggled to institute, often against great resistance. The rule of law existed in this country, existed since the reign of Edward II, in one form or another. It was not introduced by workers' struggle. Nor was it anything to do with capitalism. It was part of feudal England.

England, even then, was not really feudal. It had a money economy and so on. If you look at the facts all these simplifications become unacceptable. Along with them comes the unacceptable idea of "the workers". Is Mr O'Mahony a worker? Am I a worker? Are any of you workers? What does it mean to say that workers are going to rise up once again and take possession of their birthright? This language belongs to the 19th century, and was even wrong when applied then. You should revise your rhetoric to something more appropriate to the days in which you live.

*Roger Scruton sums up*

I WILL ADDRESS the points made in the discussion one by one. Firstly: has socialism come to an end? I don't believe socialism has come to an end, because I believe that the moral and emotional roots of socialism will always be there. Socialism will take a different form, and I entirely agree with the point made from the floor that the rhetoric of socialism in our day is outmoded. It must be amended, but once amended it will channel once again the emotion which Rousseau called "compassionating zeal". I think this is what we have heard from several people here today.

One of the pieces of rhetoric which should be amended is that of socialism versus capitalism. One gentleman, on behalf of social democracy, said absolutely rightly that this is an anachronistic debate. Nothing in the modern world is recognisably capitalist if you mean by capitalist that system that was described in *Das Kapital*. Certainly the opposition which exists is no longer socialism as then defined. For a start, capitalism has never been a system of beliefs. It was mainly used to describe an economic system. The Marxist assumption is that economic systems determine the whole social superstructure. I believe that assumption is wrong. I would never use the word capitalism to describe the conditions of any actually existing order. Let us just remember that this language comes from 19th-century debate.

Several people have said: why have I not explained what is good about "the rotten corrupt system". Someone said it has been cheeky of me to avoid what capitalism has done to the world and asked why I did not defend "my system"? Well, I was here to debate the future for socialism after Stalinism, not to defend what I believe. If asked to do so, I would have done so. As I said in the course of my talk, I do recognise the imperfections of human institutions, and I will defend nothing as an idea. I will defend certain established historical compromises as the best that we have got. One gentleman has said that this

is just a cop-out, and that I am just taking Burke's line that because of human imperfections all we can do is to sustain the given things. He said that this is not going to appeal to anyone. If this is what the Right believe, then the Right has no future.

Well, I would say that it is true that the Right's future will always be precarious so long as it believes something as unexciting as the truth. That is the problem for us. You on the left have this great advantage that you can propagate exciting myths which appeal directly to emotions and which we will never see, but nevertheless will always inspire a following. I am not in that happy position. I will only be able to rely on decency, common sense and scepticism. I agree with you that perhaps on the those grounds the Right does not have much of a future. We have had a lucky run, but maybe we will have to go under. But I am a philosopher. I am only interested in the truth, not what the future may bring.

Someone said: why do I talk only about individuals whereas Mr O'Mahony was talking about social groups and classes? Do I not believe that there are classes? Are they not economically determined? Do they have contradictions? If so, how are they resolved? This is straight from the heart of Marxist theory. I do not believe that classes are the most important form of association between people. I believe that there are other forms of association that come about in completely different ways — such as this, a debating club, a corporation, a church, a school, a university. All these bring people together and establish their collective and social nature a lot more firmly than classes do. I do not know what class I belong to. But I do know something about clubs and discussion groups and other things I belong to — not all of which some of the people in this room would approve of. And the same is true of most of you. Many people here have spoken loudly of their situation as workers, but I wonder how many here are really confident that you as opposed to me are the genuine item when it comes to being a worker or not? Perhaps we are all workers. Perhaps none of us are. I sit in front of a VDU, just like the lady here, for quite a bit of the day too.

This question also belongs to the 19th century. It has a dusty air to it. The most important question for us today is not the question of what we are as individuals, but what groups, clubs, social units, we would like to belong to. My only point is this: whatever we belong to, we ought to be free to belong to it, or not. We should not be blamed for belonging to things which it was never our choice to belong to in the first place. Perhaps I am, objectively speaking, as the Marxists used to say, a member of the bourgeoisie. But that does not mean I am a fat spiv as one gentleman referred to that class. I know a lot of people who you could classify as owners of the means of production who are neither fat nor spivs. Put on one side all this myth-making about class and talk about real social entities!

I agree that if conservatism as a philosophy confines itself to advocating the rights of individuals, as Mrs Thatcher and her ideologues used to do, it dissolves into another kind of 19th-century nonsense, a John Stuart Mill-type of

individualism which also, today, has no credibility. All of us are anxious for some type of social belonging. This goes as much for people on the Right as those on the Left. This is what we must try to define and identify. All this talk about classes is a myth and an illusion.

Now, the lady here accused me of believing that sympathy for the underdog was misguided, recommending me to read Hume. I do not think it is misguided. I think it is a natural human instinct. Again, one person said this feeling made him into a socialist. It made me into a socialist too, for a short while, admittedly under some fairly severe tuition. If I had confessed something else, I would have been out on my ear. Nevertheless, I also believe it is quite possible to be like me and think there has to be an underdog, because there has to be an overdog, and yet also feel sympathy for the underdog. I am just sceptical about the socialist plans that have been propagated for rectifying the situation of the underdog.

Someone said, quite rightly, that Marxist sympathy for the underdog was irrelevant to the argument. Marx was presenting an objective, scientific description of the material basis of society, its basis in human labour. From that description certain things followed. I agree that this is what he said he was doing. But I disagree that it was objective and scientific. The proof of its wrongness comes from the disasters of the attempts to implement it. I know that this is a deep question, and that we were not assembled to discuss it, but all that I would say is that for me the division between material base and social superstructure is untenable, the labour theory of value is untenable. The idea that certain social forms succeed each other according to the laws of motion declared in *Das Kapital* is also untenable. I reject all these three crucial theses. So I do not accept that there is anything remaining of an objective theory to replace what I described as the instinctive feeling we have for the underdog, which will always remain.

Someone went on to say that democracy takes priority over socialism. She said it is what people want that matters. You rebutted my suggestion that socialists are in a quandary as to whether they should have democracy or socialism. I think her very language went on to reveal exactly why I am worried. "The majority of the working class will take power for themselves. That will show that socialism is achieved by democracy". Firstly, you use a violent language of "taking power", not the language of constitutional process, where people vote and display their wants. You talk about a particular class, the working class. What about the rest? They have no say. What if it turns out that the majority are middle class, as in my view they may well be? Do you say they have no rights?

You go on to defend Leninism, saying the invention of the Cheka was a tactical, short-term measure designed to protect the workers' revolution against people like me. I was specifically cited as the type of person who does need to be dealt with quite severely in these transitional periods. I fully agree. If you go in that direction you will have to deal severely with people like me. But I think there are a lot more people like me than you think. I think you may find

that there are 20 million of them. You have to make the moral choice: what to do with them? This is a choice that Lenin made, and we are living with the consequences.

Someone said I should look at Eastern Europe — the gentleman from Pakistan, or somewhere like that; oh, I am not allowed to say things like that — before the Communist take-over. Well, I agree. But we should look at what was possible in Eastern Europe. Eastern Europe is very important. They have been through what we have not been through. They suffered Nazism and Communism in rapid succession. It is a big question why that happened, and what went wrong with the settlement after the First World War. Maybe that settlement was in itself wrong. But everyone knows that at least the Austrian part of the Austro-Hungarian empire had introduced some kind of democracy, at least universal adult male suffrage, in 1903. That was working quite well. Something went wrong. What went wrong is something, fortunately, we have escaped in this country. So we do not know all the forces that went first of all to make Nazism and then Communism in that part of the world. We must concentrate on the actual history of these events and try to see whether they are relevant to us at all. Maybe they went through this tragic succession of events because of the peculiar circumstances they were in after the First World War. Maybe we don't have to think about this in the same way. Maybe we don't have to worry about whether Marxism contains anything relevant to our condition at all.

Why did I say so many positive things about private property? Someone mentioned Chile under Pinochet. Surely, private property does not guarantee democracy, it was said. It is not sufficient for introducing an ideal order. But it is a necessary protection for the individual against the state. It is one thing which defines for the individual some sphere of sovereignty of his own, something he can give away if he wants, something he can exchange. Marx himself said that the condition of the proletariat was miserable because the proletarian has nothing to exchange but his own labour power. Surely you would want the proletarians to have something more than that to exchange if you want to liberate them. That "more" must be their own property.

*Sean Matgamna sums up*

THE LAST SPEECH by Mr Scruton was hypocritical. Only if Stalinism in the Soviet Union really was socialist and working class can you reasonably go on about the Stalinist massacres as discrediting socialism. The issue is not properly posed in terms of the massacre of the ruling class or of the Roger Scrutons. It is posed in terms of the fact of history: they massacred us. It is not a matter of whether we are willing, if we had the chance, to murder 20 million Roger Scrutons. The massacres have largely been massacres of our people. The history of capitalism has been a history of massacres of our people. In Paris in 1871, something in the region of 10,000 to 15,000 of our people were murdered

in cold blood after they had been captured. There are many, many other examples.

No Marxist socialist would seriously argue you can get socialism without the majority of the population wanting it. The whole idea that socialism can be imposed by a minority is absurd! The attempt would lead to all sorts of convulsions. The important issue is whether or not, if socialists have a majority, the ruling class will submit to that majority. The evidence of history is that if we came anywhere near to a majority the ruling class would disrupt bourgeois democratic procedures. Take Chile in 1970-73, for example. A left-wing government — not particularly leftwing, in fact — but a left government was elected; and then it was smashed by a military regime backed by the CIA. This military regime had many of the features of fascism.

What do I mean by “democracy”? I mean real, collective self-rule of the essential features of the lives of the people making the decisions. In reality you do not have this under capitalism. For example, much of what happens in Britain is determined by a stable civil service. Most of what happens in the lives of ordinary people is determined by capitalist monopolies who are not subject to any sort of democracy at all. They are like the petty kings of the Dark Ages, the big capitalists now, ruling their economic kingdoms as autocrats! I would not say that democracy for shareholders is any type of democracy where a company employs a vast number of people who have absolutely no say in what happens. So present-day bourgeois democracy is not real democracy, except within certain narrow, formal, political limits. It is not what it promises to be. In America, for example, less than half the people vote. A vast number of things are decided by the Supreme Court. In reality, democracy in America or in Britain is very, very shallow. We want to deepen democracy. We want to give political, social, and economic substance to the bourgeois shadow of democracy.

I do not know about whether human nature is evil or not. If you look at what the Nazis did, when normal family men — some of whom were vegetarians for altruistic reasons! — went home to their kids after organising the gassings of other kids and adults, then you know that human nature is capable of awful, awful things when the internal and social inhibitions break down. What socialists want to do is to create a set of social institutions and conditions where human beings — who begin as animals with all the possibilities of animals, and who are capable of relapsing into bestiality — can rise, and rise on a stable basis, and continue to rise above that level.

It is irrelevant how you define basic human nature. It seems to me you can define it very negatively; but that, I take, as an argument for better social institutions. After all, the good family men who murdered people in the Nazi concentration camps only did these things in conditions where German capitalism licensed a legion of savages to take control of society. These savages took control to such an extent that when the German bourgeoisie wanted to stop what they were doing, in the early '40s, they could not stop them. They brought Germany down to complete disaster. We want to change the condi-

tions where the bestiality which sometimes emerges in people cannot emerge in that way or to that extent.

Now, should we drop being called socialist? Well, in a way, yes. But that is the desire to escape from a whole series of associations which really are very difficult to escape from. What do we call ourselves? The best thing I can think of is “democratic collectivists”. But then people would not know what we were talking about, or where we came from politically. We have to fight our way out of the situation we are in. So I agree, socialist is a lousy word, so is communism; but therefore let us try to define the ideas we are talking about.

Social Democracy, has it vanquished Leninism? Well, it depends on how you evaluate what Social Democracy has achieved. Nowhere has Social Democracy achieved anything better than a welfare state. It may have alleviated, over time, the conditions of rampant red-in-tooth-and-claw capitalism. That is good. It did not achieve the socialist goals of eliminating capitalism and going on to something higher. Therefore it is not vindicated.

Classes don't exist? Again, you can take every given thing, break it down to all its particulars and its components, and deny that any whole greater than those components exists. Does society exist? You know the old argument: is a river the same river as it was five minutes ago? It is not, it is flowing. Yet we work normally on the assumption that the river exists. If you de-structure everything around you, it becomes impossible to make sense of anything. When you do this ideologically, as Roger Scruton is doing, you do it to avoid facing the fact that there are classes. Fundamentally, there are groups of people, whatever the differences between them as individuals — and there are many — with a similar relationship to the means of production. For example, there are a vast number of people in this country who can only live by selling their labour power.

According to Roger Scruton, private property is a good thing. Well, on a certain level that is true. But if workers have houses as well as labour power, they can not live on the sale of their houses. They have to continue to sell their labour power.

Classes do exist. Some people live by selling their labour power; other people own the means of production and buy labour-power — the active lives of workers. Again, there are divisions within this categorisation, but the categorisation tries to make sense of society. Breaking things down to atoms is simply an ideological evasion of thinking about the composite reality. What about Roger Scruton's own identity, his “upwards” migration from class to class? It's become relatively easier to do this in Britain in the last 40 years. Other countries have a far less structured class system — Australia and America, for instance. Individuals can change their place. But at any given time there is a vast and stable number of people who have to sell their labour power and who can not and will not escape from that condition. There is an inherent limit to the number of individuals who can migrate as Roger Scruton says he has. People can change their classes, but that does not tell you anything. In ancient Rome people could go from slaves to being very rich. One even went

on to become emperor. But it did not alter the system of slavery. Most slaves remained slaves.

Lenin did found the Cheka. I agree with the comrade who argued that the Russian revolution was right to defend itself by whatever means it found necessary. In a calm, friendly discussion you could discuss whether the setting up of a lawless Cheka, which on a day to day basis was out of political control, was the right thing to do. You could ask whether or not, in retrospect, it was not a serious mistake. But before I would discuss that in an argument with Roger Scruton, I would insist on discussing the reality in which the Cheka was created. The Bolsheviks did not begin by starting the terror; they began by abolishing the death penalty. Then they were faced by the revolt of the old ruling class. They were faced with the invasion of no less than 14 states, including Britain. One of the consequences of the destruction this wreaked was that a society which was backward to start with was driven much further back economically. A large part of the working class was destroyed. They were physically destroyed, and driven back into the countryside. You can not talk about the Cheka or condemn what Lenin and his comrades did to defend themselves without taking all this into account.

This is an example of what I started out with: the ruling class resists. Lenin did not decree that there would be civil war. The first thing the Bolsheviks did when they took power — on 8 November 1917 — was to produce an appeal for peace. It was a sane, sensible, reasonable document in a world gone mad, where millions of people were being slaughtered in a mad capitalist war. The Bolsheviks did not begin as people who recklessly killed Roger Scruton's adopted class in Russia. They began as people who wanted a peaceful revolution. They were stopped, not by their own ill-will or their own evil natures, but by the nature of the resistance to them, and by the nature of serious political struggle in class society.

Are elites necessary? Much of what Roger Scruton said here about elites and private property is sophism. What are we talking about in terms of elites? Well, of course, there are and always will be differences among human beings. You will almost certainly get elites in particular fields. You will get people who are an elite in terms of knowledge, for example. I am prepared to accept that this is so and that it should be so, and I am prepared to pay due respect to someone who has a great deal of knowledge. There are all sorts of ways people can be elites. No-one with any sense is going to tell you that you can equalise people on that level. What we want to do in terms of equality is to get rid of a system whereby there is inbuilt inequality, grotesque inequality, rooted not in the special human qualities some people may have, but in their ownership of the means of life, and where others have to work to live, submitting to the exploitation of the owners.

I don't have any objection to people owning houses. If Mrs Thatcher's selling of council houses had not meant the destruction of the social housing stock, there would not have been a particular problem from a socialist point of view. Under a socialist system perhaps people would not want to own houses,

but if they did, then that would have little bearing on the socialist project.

But we are not arguing with you on this level about property. Socialists argue against the right to own, and exploit, other people's labour power. That is what is wrong here. Yes, and the prohibition of such property rights — in the means of production and in the buying and exploiting of labour power — is the limit we would put on “freedom” in order to achieve equality — equality as I have defined it, not as Roger Scruton has defined it. There are constraints on robbery. I think a society could exist in a condition of liberty which placed all sorts of basic legal, constitutional restraints on the right to exploit other people and the right to own the means of production. I mean large-scale production, I am not talking here about artisan workshops or the corner shop.

No Marxist advocated the sort of wholesale, cauterising economic collectivisation that Stalin carried out. Trotsky criticised it. This was no Marxist programme. It served the drive of the Stalinist bureaucracy to become the sole master of the surplus product. This was the way Trotsky described it. No Marxist is in favour of barrack-room equality. On the contrary, the whole point we make about bourgeois society is that bourgeois society, having created the possibility of a high degree of individualisation of people, actually limits the realisation of that possibility to a very small number. We are the individualists here, in the proper sense of the word. If you like, we want mass individualism! We want to create a whole, stable social system in which there will be a vast increase in individualism in that sense. The whole argument here, in terms of what Marxists say, is skewed by Stalinism, and utterly confused.

Marxists never advocated the sort of things the Maoists or the Khmer Rouge did. That is not and never has been our programme. It was not the programme of Marx, nor the programme of Lenin either. If someone who has read Marx and Lenin pretends to believe that Marxism and barrack-room Maoism are the same thing, I take that as proof that he can not deal with the arguments of the real Marxists. He hides behind Stalinism from real Marxism.

So we are against private ownership of the means of production and against the right to exploit people. Beyond that there are all sorts of possibilities for the ownership of property. We are not against people owning property — the whole idea is absurd. Lenin at various times tried to organise planning, for instance, during the civil war, under “War Communism”. Lenin in 1921 created a system whereby they allowed a limited but quite extensive revival of capitalism and the bourgeoisie, under the control of the state. The whole notion that Lenin created what has become known as totalitarian planning is not true to history. All of that was carried through by Stalin after 1928, when he broke with the reviving bourgeoisie, and the bureaucracy became the sole master of the surplus product. It was then that you got the whole absurd notion of totalitarian planning, with all initiative concentrated in the state. It would have been pretty absurd in a highly advanced country with an advanced state and a developed civilisation. It was utterly harmful to the USSR, and was said to be so by Marxist critics of Stalinism at the time, many of whom were in Stalin's jails and camps.

What about the rule of law? I did not claim, did not mean to claim, that the workers created the rule of law. But, if you look at the evolution of the rule of law in England you can't just locate it in the Middle Ages and present it thereafter as a continuous, flowing, evolutionary development — and forget about the 17th-century bourgeois revolutions! You cannot talk about a stable evolution of the rule of law, without revolutionary disruption. It would not be true. What I claimed was that the workers, by their struggles, expanded the possibilities of democracy. They forced acceptance of this on the ruling class.

The rule of law is a good thing, other things being equal. But the rule of law is frequently developed through disruptions of the rule of law. The question is: whose law? Right now the law of this country is very different from the law at the time of Cromwell, not to speak of the time which Roger Scruton mentioned. We are in favour of the rule of law. But the rule of better law — law which, for example, outlaws exploitation — must be established. We are in favour of breaking the law of the bourgeoisie, if necessary, to achieve that. For example, Yeltsin and the Russian parliament went against the legalities of the system when they opposed the coup. Yeltsin broke the rule of law when, for instance, he banned the Communist Party. Was it right to do that? Of course, it was right. Yeltsin did not act as someone who represented the naturally evolving, growing, expanding parliament-based rule of law. He acted as a revolutionary. And he was right to act as a revolutionary.

Finally, I repeat: between Roger Scruton and Stalinism there is a great common bond, a common acceptance of elites. He wants a civilised elite but he wants an elite. We do not want elites; we want self-ruling democracy. And you cannot get self-ruling democracy unless you have some form of collective ownership of the basic means of production, otherwise you get gross inequality under formal equality. Roger Scruton, in terms of where he stands in history, has more in common with Stalinism — I make all the necessary qualifications here — than we socialists have. Much more!

*The debate between Roger Scruton and Sean Matgamma took place at the Socialist Organiser London Forum on 4 November 1991.*