

Traditional moralists allowed for the case of the man who is 'perplexed'; by this they meant a man whose only available options are all sinful. If I have already sent the train loaded with high explosives skimming inexorably down the line towards the densely populated town, my only available alternative may be to divert it onto a side line towards a small village. In such a case my choice is between two evil acts. The moralists were at pains to point out that this kind of perplexity never arises *innocently*. If it were not mine but some other hand that had set the train moving in the first place, then my choice would be quite different: instead of choosing which target to destroy, I should be choosing which one to save, a choice not between two evils but between two goods.<sup>1</sup> The moral of all this is that when we find ourselves perplexed in this way, when all the options seem bad, we should search further back for the earlier decision which forced these options on us.

These considerations are, of course, prompted by the coming British general election. It is extremely hard to believe that the Labour Party's 'Social contract' is going to persuade the more clear-minded workers to accept a steady worsening of their real wages and impossible to believe that the Conservative's virtual abandonment of a full-employment policy will lead to anything except social and political chaos (though given that we have only a choice of evils, we would maintain that the Labour is much the lesser). Meanwhile a macabre chorus is provided by those who want to play at BrownsHIRTS and B Specials.

The original sin which gives rise to this situation of perplexity is the determination to preserve a society based on profit. Conservative and Social Democrat parties represent, broadly speaking, two different attitudes to the problems created by such a society, the difference being partly of emphasis, partly of rhetoric and partly of substance. The economic policies of both parties derive from the discovery made three or four decades ago that it is possible to control, or at least to cushion the effects of, the boom-recession cycle that is integral to the mechanics of capitalism. The remedies advocated in slightly differing mixtures with quite different labels by each party are supposed to deal with the tidal flow that recurs every few years in the economy. What is, however being pointed out by an increasing number of experts (most lucidly in a recent paper by Professor Geoffrey Barraclough<sup>2</sup>) is that beyond these relatively minor tides there is an overarching half-century cycle (known as the Kondratieff cycle after a Russian economist who was eliminated by Stalin) which leads us not to short term recessions but to something much more serious. On this time scale 1970 marked (like 1815, 1870 and 1920) the approximate beginning of a full-scale

<sup>1</sup>The example, incidentally, shows rather neatly how what, abstractly considered, are the same physical actions, can be two quite different *human* actions, and how this difference depends not on subjective, psychological factors like motive and intention, but on objective, material conditions.

<sup>2</sup>'The end of an Era', *New York Review of Books*, June 27, 1974.

depression, the devastating effects of which we may expect to experience during the next decade. Management of the economy on the lines laid down by Keynes is not thought to be adequate to cope with this kind of collapse.

It is significant that while nearly everyone agrees that the central problem we face is one of inflation, in which money simply withers away in your hand, it is hardly ever mentioned in the press that this problem is pretty well confined to the western capitalist world and those quasi-socialist states like Yugoslavia or Allende's Chile which belong voluntarily or involuntarily within the capitalist orbit. Nations outside the 'free world' (I do not speak simply of socialist states since we have to include Russia) have their own massive problems but they do not have this one. In part this is undoubtedly because they can exercise a more repressive control over wages and work-norms as well as prices but it is also because, since economic decisions are made as far as possible in the light of social needs rather than individual profit, a great many of the problems created by the capitalist system simply do not arise for them. Apart from the defects always associated with bureaucracy, non-capitalist states tend to suffer from shortages of particular goods and from a certain kind of austerity, but they do not suffer from the corruption of the very medium of ownership that inflation implies under capitalism.

Traditional morality warned us that vices like gluttony were unreasonable and led to ultimate unhappiness because a concomitant pleasure was sought in abstraction from or in isolation from the satisfaction of more fundamental human needs. If you eat sheerly for the pleasure of taste at the expense of, say, the social intercourse that belongs with a meal or of the biological need for food, you dehumanise yourself. The pursuit of profit in abstraction from the satisfaction of social needs to which it is concomitant has analogous results. The glutton ends by debasing the currency of taste as he seeks ever more exotic stimulation; we can see inflation as the equivalent enemies of capitalism. Meanwhile, as Professor Barraclough says: 'Marx's vision of a society dedicated to welfare, not to power and profit—the only vision that makes sense in today's circumstances—still eludes us, and will do so until another crisis even more crippling than the crisis that is brewing today, brings home to the whole world the perils it faces'.

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