

Erich Fromm 1965

Introduction to *Socialist Humanism: An International Symposium*

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One of the most remarkable phenomena of the past decade has been the renaissance of Humanism in various ideological systems. Humanism—in simplest terms, the belief in the unity of the human race and man’s potential to perfect himself by his own efforts—has had a long and varied history stretching back to the Hebrew prophets and the Greek philosophers. Terentius’ statement, “I believe that nothing human is alien to me,” was an expression of the Humanist spirit, echoed centuries later by Goethe’s “Man carries within himself not only his individuality but all of humanity, with all its potentialities, although he can realize these potentialities in only a limited way because of the external limitations of his individual existence.”

Over the ages some Humanists have believed in the innate goodness of man or the existence of God, while others have not. Some Humanist thinkers—among them Leibniz, Goethe, Kierkegaard, and Marx—particularly stressed the need to develop individuality to the greatest possible extent in order to achieve the highest harmony and universality. But all Humanists have shared a belief in the possibility of man’s perfectibility, which, whether they believed in the need for God’s grace or not, they saw as dependent upon man’s own efforts (which is why Luther was not a Humanist). Nonreligious Humanists like Gianbattista Vico and Karl Marx carried this further to say that man makes his own history and is his own creator.

Because Humanists believe in the unity of humanity and have faith in the future of man, they have never been fanatics. After the Reformation they saw the limitations of both the Catholic and the Protestant positions, because they judged not from the narrow angle of one particular organization or power group, but from the vantage point of humanity. Humanism has always emerged as a reaction to a threat to mankind: in the Renaissance, to the threat of religious fanaticism; in the Enlightenment, to extreme

nationalism and the enslavement of man by the machine and economic interests. The revival of Humanism today is a new reaction to this latter threat in a more intensified form—the fear that man may become the slave of things, the prisoner of circumstances he himself has created—and the wholly new threat to mankind’s physical existence posed by nuclear weapons.

This reaction is being felt in all camps—Catholic, Protestant, Marxist, liberal. This does not mean, however, that contemporary Humanists are willing to forego their specific philosophical or religious convictions for the sake of “better understanding,” but rather that, as Humanists, they believe they can reach the clearest understanding of different points of view from the most precise expression of each, always bearing in mind that what matters most is the human reality behind the concepts.

This volume is an attempt to present the ideas of one branch of contemporary Humanism. Socialist Humanism differs in an important respect from other branches. Renaissance and Enlightenment Humanism believed that the task of transforming man into a fully human being could be achieved exclusively or largely by education. Although Renaissance Utopians touched upon the need for social changes, the socialist Humanism of Karl Marx was the first to declare that theory cannot be separated from practice, knowledge from action, spiritual aims from the social system. Marx held that free and independent man could exist only in a social and economic system that, by its rationality and abundance, brought to an end the epoch of “prehistory” and opened the epoch of “human history,” which would make the full development of the individual the condition for the full development of society, and vice versa. Hence he devoted the greater part of his life to the study of capitalist economics and the organization of the working class in the hopes of instituting a socialist society that would be the basis for the development of a new Humanism.

Marx believed that the working class would lead in the transformation of society because it was at once the most dehumanized and alienated class, and potentially the most powerful, since the functioning of society depended upon it. He did not foresee the development of capitalism to the point where the working class would prosper materially and share in the capitalist spirit while all of society would become alienated to an extreme degree. He never became aware of that *affluent alienation* which can be as dehumanizing as *impoverished alienation*.

Stressing the need for a change in the economic organization and for transferring control of the means of production from private (or corporate) bands into the bands of organized producers, Marx was misinterpreted both by those who felt threatened by his program, and by many socialists. The former accused him of caring only for the physical, not the spiritual, needs of man. The latter believed that his goal was

exclusively material affluence for all, and that Marxism differed from capitalism only in its methods, which were economically more efficient and could be initiated by the working class. In actuality, Marx's ideal was a man productively related to other men and to nature, who would respond to the world in an alive manner, and who would be rich not because he had much but because he was much.

Marx was seeking an answer to the meaning of life, but could not accept the traditional religious answer that this can be found only through belief in the existence of God. In this he belongs to the same tradition as the Enlightenment thinkers, from Spinoza to Goethe, who rejected the old theological concepts and were searching for a new spiritual frame of orientation. But, unlike such socialists as Jean Jaurés, Lunacharsky, Gorki, and Rosa Luxemburg, who permitted themselves to deal more explicitly with the question of the spiritual, Marx shied away from a direct discussion of the problem because he wanted to avoid any compromise with religious or idealistic ideologies, which he considered harmful.

Authentic Marxism was perhaps the strongest spiritual movement of a broad, nontheistic nature in nineteenth-century Europe. But after 1914—or even before—most of this spirit disappeared. Many different factors were involved, but the most important were the new affluence and ethics of consumption that began to dominate capitalist societies in the period between the wars and immediately following the second and the seesawing pattern of destructiveness and suffering caused by two world wars. Today, the questions of the meaning of life and man's goal in living have emerged again as questions of primary importance.

One must realize that, by necessity, the spiritual problem has been camouflaged to a large extent until our present moment in history. As long as productive forces were not highly developed, the necessity to work, and to keep alive, gave sufficient meaning to life. This still holds true for the vast majority of the human race, even those living in industrially developed countries where the mixture of work and leisure, and the dream of ever increasing consumption, keeps man from realizing his true human potential, of being what he could be. But we are moving rapidly toward a fully industrialized, automated world in which the ten or twenty hour work week will be standard, and where the many material satisfactions provided for everyone will be taken for granted. In this totally affluent society (which will be a planned if not a socialist one), man's spiritual problem will become much more acute and urgent than it has ever been in the past.

This volume has a dual purpose. It seeks to clarify the problems of Humanist socialism in its various theoretical aspects, and to demonstrate that socialist Humanism is no longer the concern of a few dispersed intellectuals, but a movement to be found

throughout the world, developing independently in different countries. In this volume many Humanist socialists from the East and the West meet for the first time. Reading the volume, contributors as well as readers may become fully aware for the first time of the common response of many socialists to what the history of the past decades and the present threat to the physical and spiritual survival of mankind has taught them.

With five exceptions, all of the contributions were written specifically for this volume, but in no case did I suggest the topic of a specific essay to the author. I preferred to ask each of them to write on any topic that appeared most important to him within the general frame of reference of socialist Humanism. I hoped that in this way the volume would represent the main interests of Humanist socialists. It did not seem to me a disadvantage if some topics were dealt with several times by different authors. On the contrary, I thought it would be an interesting and even impressive phenomenon to see the fundamental agreement among most authors represented in this volume and the extent to which a new school of thinking has arisen in various parts of the world, in particular among the scholars of Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia, whose writings have so far been little known in the English speaking world.

Despite the authors' common bond, there are important disagreements among them and with the editor. The authors belong to different political parties. Most of them are socialists, but some are not. Most of them are Marxists, but some—including Catholics, independent liberals, and non Marxist labor party members—are not. No one whose contribution is published here can be held responsible for the views expressed by any other author or by the editor.

As Humanists, all of the contributors have a common concern with man and the full unfolding of his potentialities, and a critical attitude toward political reality, especially toward ideologies. This latter is of the utmost importance. Today, more than ever, we find concepts like freedom, socialism, humanism, and God used in an alienated, purely ideological way, regardless of who uses them. What is real in them is the word, the sound, not a genuine experience of what the word is supposed to indicate. The contributors are concerned with the *reality* of human existence, and hence are critical of ideology; they constantly question whether an idea expresses the reality or hides it.

There is one other factor common to all the contributors: their conviction that the most urgent task for mankind today is the establishment of peace. No one represented in this volume in any way supports the cold war.

Inevitably there are omissions, which the editor regrets. Most of the authors are either European or North American, even though Asia, Africa, and Australia are represented. There is also a rather one sided emphasis on the philosophical aspect of

socialist Humanism as compared to the practical and empirical problems of Humanist socialist organization, which are dealt with only in the last chapter, *On the Practice of Socialist Humanism*. Indeed, a great number of important problems of socialist organization are not only not represented here, but have been little discussed in socialist literature in general. (Such problems are, for instance, the distinction between real human needs and artificially produced needs, the possibility of a revival of handicrafts as a luxury industry, new forms of democratic participation based on small face to face groups, etc.)

To sum up: it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that never in the past hundred years have there been such widespread and intensive studies of the problem of Humanist socialism as today. To demonstrate this phenomenon and show some of the results of these studies are the purposes of this volume. In this concern for man and opposition to dehumanization we feel a deep sense of solidarity with all Humanists, many of whom do not share all of our views, but all of whom share our concern for the full development of man.

I wish to thank all those who have helped me in my editorial task. I have often turned to Thomas B. Bottomore of the London School of Economics and Gajo Petrović of the University of Zagreb for advice, and they have always been most generous in their response. I am grateful to the contributors for responding so cooperatively to my suggestions about space and organization, and to the translators for taking on the difficult job of putting complicated manuscripts in French, German, Italian, Polish, and Serbo Croat into English. Finally my sincere thanks to Anne Freedgood of Doubleday for her ever present interest in this book and for her extraordinary effort in preparing the manuscript.

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