

PLANNING ECONOMIC SYSTEMS AND THE FUTURE OF OUR SOCIETY

by **Bob Goudzwaard**, Professor of Economics at the Free University of Amsterdam

Introduction

The future of our society is the topic of many publications, both in the field of science (futurology) and in the field of literature (science fiction). Often in these publications a certain ambivalence appears. *Either* a future is predicted where man is enabled by his science and by his enormous technological powers to create a new and better world - a world with all kinds of conveniences, without hunger, and with enough material abundance to diminish individual and national jealousy - or a future is predicted in which man is overwhelmed by his own scientific and technological means. Here the image arises of a future in which man is 'put in a box'. In this future, man is manipulated as an object of science (bio-engineering, social engineering etc.); as a plaything of the economic expansion of industry (the manipulation of tastes); as the extension piece of the necessary advance of technology (man as a 'digit' in a computer). He is pushed into the army of the unemployed as soon as technology performs his work better than he does. Here is man as a powerful autonomous subject *versus* man as a dependent, feeble and terrified object: the contradiction is indeed sharp and clear.

The origin of this ambivalence regarding the future of our culture is at least in part due to the very nature of the humanist world and life view. Humanism contains in itself a bipolarity, stressing the crucial importance of human autonomous freedom as much as the human striving for rational control (Dooyeweerd). The two main motives of humanism - freedom and control - —are unlimited: neither can stop until it has conquered the world. So they have not only clashed in philosophy, in which both poles of human autonomy have been continuously involved in a dialectical process of action and reaction, but now they also begin radically to threaten each other in the midst of our present-day societies. And it is very clear that in the future the possibility of a full collision between the struggle for full control and the (threatened) idea of human freedom can in no way be avoided.

But how can we explain that while the prospects of the future become more ambivalent, and while the coming is predicted - scientifically - of an inhuman and even a chaotic world, at the same time the feelings of helplessness, powerlessness, and of being 'fated' are growing so rapidly? The growing doubts about our future seem not to mobilize western man, but to paralyse him. To explain that, we should look not only to religious motives - which are no doubt present - but also to the existence of mighty societal systems: capitalism, socialism-communism being of importance here. Seen from the viewpoint of modern western man, they seem to have life *in themselves*. They are forces of modernization and instruments of welfare, but at the same time they look like powers which possess the possibility of a full economic, social and technological 'objectification' of man. Karl Löwith once expressed this modern feeling by

saying: 'Progress has equally liberated us and enchained us. We cannot stop it or force its reversal - progress itself is moving onward irresistibly.'

It is clear that this whole intriguing question of the prospects for the future and the role of our societal systems is of the utmost importance for the Christian. His view of the future, in the perspective of Christ's return, is no doubt very different from the humanistic point of view. But how does that lead him or her - if possible - to different standpoints, here and now, in relation to life style, scientific activities, and social and political outlook?

In trying to give an answer, our first inquiry deals with the view of man and his future which is prevalent in Marxism-Leninism and manifest within communist society from day to day in the theory and practice of planning (part 2). Then we shall look to western society and its capitalistic system, asking ourselves which utopias prevail there, or are perhaps in the process of being destroyed (part 3). Finally, we shall try to answer the question of what our *Christian* attitude has to be in relation to the problem of the future (part 4).

The communist outlook on the future—and its system

In his fascinating series of articles, *Einführung in die Kommunistische Ideologie (Introduction to Communist Ideology, Informationen zur Politischen Bildung, 1964, I, II, III, Bonn, Germany)* Prof. J. M. Bochenski from Freiburg in Switzerland gives the following summary of present Marxist-Leninist views of man and his future:

- (1) Man is the highest form of life in the whole of nature. He is not only in a measure of degree higher than the animals, but also is qualitatively different.
- (2) Because outside nature nothing exists or even can exist, man is also the highest reality, in every sense of the word. (In that confession a radical atheism is included: God is not allowed to exist, otherwise man would not be the highest reality.)
- (3) Man at this moment is not yet 'man'. The historical process of the formation of man (*Herausbildung des Menschen*) has not yet come to its conclusion. We are still living in prehistory (*die Vorgeschichte*). For man, in the evolution of history, has not yet left the realm of animal life in every aspect. This becomes manifest in two ways:
 - (a) There is still struggle between *individual* persons and groups (*Kampf ums Einzeldasein*), and
 - (b) Man is still not fully able to *plan* his own history in a rational way. For that is his destiny as *homo sapiens*, as a rational being. Therefore he is not yet completely free - the (qualitative) jump from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom still lies before him.
- (4) The persistence of this lack of planning and of freedom until today has its deepest root in the continued existence of private means of production in this world, out of which not only exploitation and alienation arise, but also anarchy, lack of control (*Planlosigkeit*), misery and war.

This summary of the ideology of Marxism-Leninism by one of its best judges makes clear that *planning* is a vital phenomenon in the whole world and life view of Marxism-Leninism and not only as an instrument for a full rational control of nature and the future. It is not only the necessary tool to create a more happy society: it is also the crucial mark of real humanity. It is the decisive borderline between the animal and the human phases of history. We not only plan to be able to live, but we are living in and by planning; planning is human life *itself*. Therefore in Marxism-Leninism there is no principal objection from the pole of humanistic freedom over and against the dominating pole of full rational control. For control, the planning of present and future, is the only way to *obtain* freedom. Freedom therefore is reduced to a (guaranteed) promise in the future.

That this picture of the Marxist-Leninist world and life view is a correct one, also becomes clear in the important book of Igor V. Bestuzev-Lada, *Onkno v. Buduscee (Window to the Future. Dutch translation: Venster op de Toekomst, Pantoscoop, Amsterdam 1972)*. It is written by the director of the Central Institute for Social Planning of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.

Bestuzev-Lada deals with the Russian concept of social planning as a necessity: 'For us, social planning is of high practical importance; it raises the scientific level of all socialist planning, and consolidates the

earliest planning of the whole development of both economy and culture - which is essential to our whole socialistic system.' In the organism of living man, he explains, 'there are 15 progressive organs, 17 regressive ones (which no longer play the important role they played before) and 107 rudimentary organs. The development of all these organs in either upward or downward direction is still going on.' But to wait for that evolution of man can take too long. Therefore, it is important to know that it is possible 'to accelerate the development of certain organs'. And here the idea of social planning comes in. It is the study of a series of normative prognoses 'to describe what the concrete details of man's optimal physical manifestation will look like from our present point of view, and to explain what steps must(!) be taken to obtain that optimal result' (p 171, Dutch edition). And the basis of that possibility lies in science, including the medical and bio-sciences, and in the powers of modern technology. The outcome will be beyond our expectations: even moral improvement lies in its train. It is indeed a pure example of the Enlightenment belief in man's perfectibility that we find in this book. But the yardstick and the standards for this moral improvement - which will arise mainly through planned education - have become somewhat different: 'Our moral code is dedication to the matter of communism, love for our socialist country, the will to labour for the health of our society, care for the increase of our wealth, consciousness of social duties; and after all this has been said, 'mutual respect between human beings, pureness, simplicity and humility, feelings of justice.' 'All these principles', so Bestuzev concludes, 'are seen by us in direct correlation with the building of a scientific world and life view, with the development of labour (production), proletarian internationalism and human personality in general; they offer us the correct basis of normative (goal-orientated) planning in the realm of ethics' (p 233, Dutch ed.). No wonder that, at the end of his book, Bestuzev speaks in a very enthusiastic way about the future of mankind; a future full of abundance, automation in production, a long lifetime and gay people: 'We foresee splendid palaces of hundreds of floors in the cities of our communistic future, almost sunk in an ocean of green, and mirroring themselves in the surrounding canals and lakes. The dwellings will all boast swimming pools and wall-size television screens which give us the impression of being in lecture rooms or in the company of our friends' (p 273 Dutch ed.).

Three things now become clear:

- (1) The communist future is above all a planned future. It starts from the certainty of an on-going process of human intellectual progress. But nevertheless, that good future has to be conquered - and planning will enable that. Only under this condition does a full utopia await us.
- (2) That brilliant future is only possible in societal systems that are based on communal ownership of all means of production. And even then, to obtain that future, a lot has to be sacrificed. The life of today has at root no other meaning than to be serviceable for the coming of tomorrow, when man will leave the domain of the animals and will become human.
- (3) Because of this single goal of history, even the norms of justice, morality, freedom and love have to be *instruments* in that great struggle. In Marxism-Leninism, these norms *a priori* support *all* planning efforts. They have an ideological content: they are interpreted in such a way that they can be used to strengthen the grasp of a planning-communism in all ways. These 'norms' obtain their content from what *has to be reached*.

The western outlook on the future - and its system

A full treatment of the current western view of the future or of the role of its societal system is, of course, impossible here. But in confrontation with the communist view and the communist systems, at least some comments have to be made.

- (1) In western culture - and therefore too in western society - the value of human freedom is (still) not fully absorbed by the struggle for comprehensive rational control of man and nature by science, technology and economic progress. Therefore, there remains some respect in western society for human rights, human liberty etc. This means, however, that the dialectical tension between those two poles - control and freedom - is not removed, but prolongs itself from day to day. Consequently, the future is very insecure. For which pole will win? The present tendencies are in the direction of a

growing control, especially of social and economic life. But while the communist future is a very secure one (in its view), the western future remains insecure (even in its own view) and also ambiguous.

- (2) The societal system of the West is largely the offspring of western culture and religion. So, as far as the humanistic background is concerned, it can well be explained that, next to the humanist idea of autonomous freedom, which found its expression in the idea of the law-state and natural liberties, the idea of a rational control of life has also come to the fore in our societal structures. The role of persistent rational promotion of technological progress and material economic growth has to be mentioned here. That motive of domination (by progress) which has moulded our business enterprises, our labour unions, and even our political parties, is still a powerful one; even if in our western culture—as it is now—the doubts are growing that the outcome of all that artificial progress will be a good one. Moreover, in the so-called ‘dialogue’ between East and West, the most important ‘issue’ is still which of the two systems is able to lead to the most advanced technology and the highest results in terms of yearly economic growth.
- (3) Man, however, cannot choose a master without becoming a servant. Science, technique and economic wealth too, in part, have been declared to be *good in themselves* in our western societies. They have been seen, since the time of the Enlightenment, as infallible guides for us all towards a happy future. Therefore, within the structure of our society, an almost autonomous development has been guaranteed to them. But autonomy has a counterpart, and that counterpart is dependence, a loss of freedom and responsibility. Loss of freedom is especially observable if we understand ‘freedom’ in the biblical sense of being liberated from the powers of slavery. Materialism, technocracy and scientism have become well-known phenomena in our western culture.
- (4) Within socialist countries, the determination to create a better world has led—as we saw already - to an ‘ideologizing’ of all norms and values (particularly since Lenin). Justice, love and liberty—they all derive their meaning and content from the new source of revelation of all truth: the bright communistic future, made possible by the victory of the working class. (Futurism is perhaps a good name for that attitude.) So justice is always on the side of the worker; love is always solidarity with the labouring class and with communism as such; freedom is only possible on the basis of socialist planning. We should, however, remain aware of the fact that similar developments of ‘ideologizing’ have occurred in our western societies. Here we do not find a norm-interpretation based on the necessary victory of world-communism, but one based upon the necessity of material progress within our present mixed-market economies. The norm of justice, for instance, is mostly seen as a matter of sufficient money-transfers to the weak in society; social justice is ‘accomplished’ by guaranteed incomes. That is a norm-interpretation orientated to the necessity, or desirability, of a growing material wealth to society as a whole. And the basic rule of ethics in the West is seldom deeper than the utilitarian one, which says that we all should strive for the greatest happiness of the greatest number in terms of income, consumer goods, and leisure. Love is also often narrowed here to the idea of social and economic group-solidarity. So there is a communist ideology, but also a western ideology too!
- (5) Our western culture and economic system are at the moment confronted with many severe problems. There are problems *within* our social system: like unemployment, inflation and alienation by working conditions. But there are also problems related to the *limitations* of our earth: pollution, scarcity of raw materials, energy, etc. Confronted with these problems the interest in *planning* (global, national, sectoral) is constantly growing in our western societies. Planning should give us the central guidelines of salvation from all these problems. And it should, if possible, secure us a good and abundant future, delivering us from evils and insecurities.

An important example of this modern trend is the book of Dennis Gabor, Nobel Prizewinner for Physics, *The Mature Society* (1972). In this book Gabor expresses his conviction in very clear words: ‘All my hopes and all my fears are in the future of this historical process: how, by better social machinery, better compromises may be made, with an *improved* human nature’ (p 6). But how to do

that? Is human improvement a natural result? No, says Gabor: 'I know of the almost infinite corruptibility of man.' But nevertheless he stresses at the same time: 'I believe in the perfectibility of man, because this is the only working hypothesis for any decent and responsible person.' How then to bridge that enormous gap between 'corruptibility' and 'perfectibility'? The answer of Gabor is clear: that gap can only be bridged by rational control, by *planning*. And therefore Gabor also speaks of the unavoidability of social engineering, of planned education, and of bio-engineering. For, as he states very bluntly: 'We must change human nature as it now manifests itself, so as to fit into a system in which progress is not measured by the annual growth of GNP [Gross National Product] per capita.' It is a remarkable statement: western man began with building a societal structure to promote his material growth; and now that this material growth becomes more difficult to reach, he himself has to be adapted to what his system needs. The roles are reversed: the master becomes the servant, and the servant the master. But there is more to be said here. While a lot of literature is already written about a possible convergence of the *systems* of East and West, we can notice here a remarkable convergence in the *thought styles* of East and West. In the area of scientific planning, the communist and the non-communist planners are using the same models, the same terminology, but they also seem to serve analogous goals. They seem to be the high priests of the new Hope for mankind. Not only our bodies, but also our souls will be renewed by their word of power.

- (6) At the moment, western civilization is insecure about its own goals. Previous targets of growing wealth and luxury look obsolete. There is a search for new *inspiring* goals.

This process is quite understandable as soon as we realize that, for modern secularized western man, 'goals' are to a high degree substitutes for 'norms'. Real norms, coming from outside, can no more be accepted by him, but at the same time he cannot live without at least some rules and/or indications. So rules, derived from overarching personal and social *goals*, take their place. (It is for instance quite remarkable that most people, asked about the meaning of their life, give an answer in terms of the goals they strive for.) This makes clear why the current insecurity in western civilization about the *goals* of our societies and systems brings a crisis into the heart of western man. It can be compared with a *Götterdämmerung* - the gods which we chose are now betraying us! This insecurity has to be removed in one way or another. Insecurity about your goals cannot be tolerated, if reaching out towards goals has become *the meaning* of your life.

Therefore we may perhaps expect the return of *myths* to our western societies: new, inspiring images of a better world, perhaps around great new leaders or around the idea of a central world-government; maybe in the line of the Gabor and the Bestuzevs; but also other goals than those they suggest, are possible. In any case, we can say that if these new 'sources' of meaning come, they will no doubt try to orientate the *totality* of life to their fulfillment. And planning? It will do the job.

The Christian outlook and attitude

But where do we stand: and how should we live? The (very rudimentary) comparison we made between the communist view of the future and the western one can help us to some extent. We saw that there are still many differences between the two. But we also recognized some clear similarities.

Perhaps the word 'utopia' has to come in here. In Marxist-Leninist societies the utopia of

- the transition of socialism into communism,
- the final victory of the labour class,
- the jump from the realm of necessity into the realm of freedom,
- the origin of a new type of man on earth, which has left its pre-history behind

is of such an overwhelming importance that it indeed contains *revelational* truth. The utopia tells us how to live here and now: it gives not only the security of all hope, but also the content of all norms. Therefore in that utopia, the images of man, of society and of the future are immediately tied together. For only one type of society can bring forth this utopia, and that is the society which owns all the means of production,

using planning as its indispensable handmaid.

In the culture and the societies of the West, the old utopias of a better future (with an abundance of wealth, luxury and leisure time) have lost a lot of their glamour. No wonder, if 'abundance' is presented to you in the wrapping of pollution, and if leisure time is offered to you in the wrapping of unemployment! But we should not conclude that the power of western utopian thought - understood as the set of guiding ideas about a better man-made future - is no longer present in western civilization. That would be a big mistake. For it is still vigorously at work in the structural system of present capitalism, which is quite unthinkable without its systematic progress of economic growth and productivity. It is alive, too, in the western ideological interpretation of norms (an interpretation still orientated to the fulfillment of our old utopias). We see its return, moreover, in a new interest in the idea of overall-planning of a western society to *secure* us a new and better world again.

But if indeed we still have to do with *utopia*-orientated societies, what then does our belief in the *eschaton* mean, the promise of Christ's certain return to this earth? That becomes, right now, a crucial question.

In his book *De Toekomst is Verleden Tijd (The Future is Past Time)* Fred Polak once made the suggestion of a possible 'division of labour' between utopia and eschatology. He summarized it by quoting the old expression '*Ora et Labora*'. Let the eschatology pray, he said, so that the utopia can do the work? Is that the solution? Martin Buber is far nearer to the truth when he points out, in his book *Pfade in Utopia (Paths in Utopia)*, that neither utopia nor eschatology floats above our heads like a cloud; the *eschaton* of the Bible has primarily a *prophetic* content, summoning us to respond, to come into action, because we are engaged. Perhaps Buber gives too little weight to the apocalyptic dimension of the *eschaton*. But what he notices sharply and correctly, is that the biblical hope and view of the future has to manifest itself in the style in which we work and live here today.

The *eschaton* is in fact not simply the expectation of an end. It means primarily *fulfillment*. Christ is the Horizon of life, the Meaning of it from the beginning. That does not only relate to spiritual life but to economic life, to family life, and to the ways of technology and politics. We ourselves are living in the penultimate days (Bonhoeffer's *das Vorletzte*). But that summons us to know more dimensions in our life than that of living towards a future of our own making. Living in the dimension of the *eschaton* means in the first place: living *out of* a future, out of *His* future. Thus is brought in an outlook on man, on future, on society, which is quite different from every utopia-orientated type of thought.

- (1) Firstly, Christ's return, when he will require an account from all of us, reminds us of the fact that this world bears an 'answer-structure'. It is not created to be serviceable to self-made goals, as utopia-orientated societies make them. Everything in creation is destined to give us the possibility to respond, to give answer, to the living God and to our fellowmen. That implies using power only under the control of justice, using knowledge only in the way of wisdom, using sexuality only in the service of personal love, using scarce resources in the style dictated by good stewardship of God's creation. Culture is Answer! There is no culture without that element of Answer, because responding to God and our neighbours is the very heart of all humanity.
- (2) Norms, therefore, are revealed ways of answer. They are the trustworthy ways, given from the *beginning* to show where we can go safely (*torah*). Every ideologizing of norms thus brings us into great danger. It can lead us on a course of continuous disaster in this created (answer-orientated) world. Breaking through ideologies, however, is only possible if we are aware of the non-human origin of all real norms. And if we realize, too, that they are the decisive yardstick by which we shall be judged on that great Day - not only as individuals, but also as societies. What did we do as western civilization with our enormous economic potential, with our knowledge, with our immense power, with our technology? Were real *answers* forthcoming? That revealing question lays bare our *sins*.

Perhaps the heart of Christian life in these days can be summarized in the four following characteristics:

- a Christian life-style which makes clear that the foundation of our life does not lie in what we

possess; so that a profound relativity (in the way we deal with income etc.) can come in, combined with a real willingness to help others and share with them what we have;

- a spiritual fight against all types of ideologization, in East and West, in our own heart as much as in our societies; the ideologies take away the power of God's *torah* for the liberation of our proud societies;
- a preaching of the gospel that Babel will fall, which means that this good creation cannot endure the continuous terror of human exploitation and pride (and will react against that pride in showing a growing degree of pollution, depletion, human alienation);
- a continuous effort to make clear that even our societal structures can show a 'substantial healing' (Schaeffer) if we really want to leave our goal-orientated paths to the old and the new utopias, if we are willing to bring even our economic and technical developments under the guidance and direction of the *norms-of-the-beginning*; that is to say, of the *torah* of good stewardship, of humanity in work, of sharing with the poor, and of a technology which is appropriate to the moderate scale of human responsibility.

Discussion

The nature of an ideology was what first attracted discussion following Prof. Goudzwaard's lecture. He defined 'ideology' as a body of ideas that asks for practical realization and conservation. As a goal to be reached it demands the subservience of all norms. Hence justice, love and truth are mobilized in the train of the ideology and are interpreted in terms of the practical goal being sought. However, in the serviceability of norms to goals, humanity is threatened by planning. The western utopia is no longer a dream but a project to be achieved by ideology.

The return of Christ reminds us that societies too must undergo judgement - answerability is not only for individuals. Norms are given by Christ along with the possibilities of technology, of economic life or of sexuality. Each possibility has its *torah*, its way to go safely in service.

The obedient enterprise is at a disadvantage in competition. How can its bankruptcy be prevented?

Not only what a government allows or demands, but what a culture permits is involved here. The consumers might make a thing possible. A Christian labour association can ask its members to set aside ten per cent of every wage rise in a fund to be applied under workers' control for the task of 'healing' in the enterprise. Substantial healing rather than global renewal is our present expectation.

What about social engineering?

This is an example of the *hubris* in modern society that attempts to mould man to fit it. Planning ought rather to be obedient than revelational - submitting progressively to divine norms. The computer analysis used by the Club of Rome now reveals how we must live because we have become too small for our responsibilities. It is not the world that is too small for us.

We should remember, too, that the norms to which our planning must be obedient are really reflected in our reality and not in a nihilistic world. We can see them in the human response within our heritage. Western Europe has not lost all touch with the Father's house. Our family life for instance is not outside of creational norms.

Yes, norms are incarnated in reality while being at the same time in God's hands.

How are utopia and the Christian hope to be distinguished?

Utopia has to be built from our deepest dreams and desires, at any cost, mobilizing every resource.

The Christian hope is not to create a total better new world; it awaits one that comes down to rest on this world. Yet we must still hasten toward that future. Every day must be open to the Lord who may return

tomorrow. Our technology or economics of today must lead towards an open society as compared with the 'tunnel vision' of totalitarianism.

Bob Goudzwaard©