

LAND and LIBERTY

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COVER PHOTO: Solidarity leader Lech Walesa, speaking to US citizens in Daley Plaza during a recent visit to Chicago, bridged the political gap created by the Iron Curtain by declaring: "You can love two countries - Poland and America". But can he bridge the economic gap.

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Russia's chance

HISTORY is full of those turning points that are celebrated as revolutions. The explosive character of these ruptures with the past is forever studied by the learned, who prefer to skate over the objective conditions that could have led to peaceful transformations.

There are few doctoral credits to be earned for these on what could have been.

Yet revolutions are the evidence that those who controlled society got it wrong and bloodshed became inevitable.

Unsung are the heroes whose voices, in between times, during the dark days which may span centuries, go unheard; who plead for the reforms that ought to happen slowly, progressively, removing the need for revolution.

These men of vision do not rank with the great military heroes beloved of historians. Their contribution to social evolution is all too often neutralised by the reactionaries who, by spurious argument, set the limits to peaceful change.

For example: justice is invoked to perpetuate injustice, as happens over arguments about property rights. Change, no matter how desirable, must not be at the expense of existing property rights; "To disappoint people's legitimate expectations now would wreak massive injustices."

The United States would still be operating a slave economy if this argument was honoured. Wilberforce would not have succeeded in influencing the House of Commons, and Britain would still be shipping slaves across the Atlantic. For the ownership of slaves was a legitimate part of property rights.

Another ploy to stifle change: the claim that the injustices were perpetrated too far in the past to be relevant to the present. This ignores the fact that, if an injustice was committed in the past, and perpetuated today, then it's an institutionalised process, built into the

system - constantly reaffirmed, a "running sore."

Failure to correct the problem directly implicates the present in the mistakes of the past.

THESE reflections are provoked by the debate in Moscow, where property rights are the heart of perestroika.

Leonid Abalkin, the deputy Prime Minister responsible for economic reform, says the state has to loosen its control over the means of production:

The diversity of the forms of property, their equality and competition, is the fundamental condition for the economic freedom of citizens which ensures the best possible utilization of their abilities.

The conservatives did not like the sound of that. So they applied pressure on Mikhail Gorbachev.

As a result, the Prime Minister, Nikolai Ryzhkov, addressing the Communist Party's central committee meeting just before Christmas, rejected popular calls for private property rights. Land would remain in state ownership; industrial enterprises would not be denationalised.

The Soviet Union now has the historic opportunity to develop along a unique path - rejecting the extremes of both the collective and individualistic forms of property ownership.

With land in social ownership, the state can now grant individual use rights within a market economy: this is the most effective way of spiritually liberating people and maximising material welfare.

And by charging the full rent for the right to possess land and natural resources, the rights of society would also be preserved.

This sophisticated solution to the search for an alternative to Marxism could be planted in the collectivised fields of Siberia as a fitting memorial for the millions of peasants who died because the men of reason were rejected in favour of a revolution.