

60 Years In The Cultural Crossfire

Jack Lindsay at 87 is currently working on his 171st book. Since he arrived in Britain in 1926, he has made his living by writing, as a poet, novelist, playwright, classical scholar, art-historian, literary critic, historian, writer on science, philosophy and politics. He was a key figure in the literary debates on the Left in the 1930s and 1940s, and was an editor of the magazines *Our Time*, *Arena*, and *Anvil*. He joined the Communist Party in 1941. His most recent books include *The Crisis in Marxism* - a critical study of the writings of Lukacs, Althusser, Bloch and Gramsci. He now lives in Cambridge, where he talked to Andy Croft.

Why did you come to Britain in the first place?

Well, I was naturally interested in English poetry. I'd been working in Australia, doing what I could around poetry there, and when the chance came to go to England and do some publishing over here I thought this would be an excellent chance of getting to know a bit of what was really going on in poetry in England.

Why do you think so many writers from different backgrounds should have all ended up on the Left in the second half of the 1930s?

I suppose there was in a general way the feeling that something had gone wrong. We all felt we had to try and change society.

How would you describe the literary culture of the Left in those years of the Popular Front?

I wouldn't make any great claims - it wasn't a great culture. Nevertheless it was a good culture I think. There was good work from Rex Warner, Ralph Bates, BL Coombes; on the critical side there was Alick West and Ralph Fox. It was based on a struggle to find out what was going wrong in society, getting away from the individualistic points of view - but keeping respect for the

individual of course.

What was the role of the Communist Party in that literary culture?

As I looked around, I found that the one body which seemed to have an affinity with my point of view, that felt that something was very badly wrong in society that was trying to find a way through this impasse into new ways, was the Communist Party. One more or less turned to that. This was felt quite widely. People like Edgel Rickword and myself, and people like Spender, were very influenced, and this led in turn to more and more attention being paid to the cultural initiatives of the Communist Party. The Spanish Civil War was the thing that brought it all together in a clear, strong and precise way. It had an enormous effect on intellectuals.

Most literary historians have assumed that this cultural 'movement' died in 1939 with the outbreak of the war. You have argued that, on the contrary, there was a much bigger and more popular 'cultural upsurge' taking place in this country through the war years . . .

Yes. Naturally there was, with the war, a strong check to those forms in which things had been going on in the 30s. To a degree there was a real anti-fascist element in the war which came out stronger as the war developed. It was rooted in people and was a development of the whole thing that had been going on in the 30s. The direct connection wasn't seen in a simple way but one felt it was there. So I was very concerned to try to relate this anti-fascist struggle in the war to the whole struggle for human values - liberty, freedom and so on - in the history of the nation.

What do you think were the enduring successes of that period between 1935 and, say, 1945?

Some of our concerns and general ideas came out very strongly and played their part in turning the war into a

real anti-fascist war. There was a very considerable amount of cultural activity during the war. In the localities there was a great deal of cultural activity which has gone unrecorded: the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, ENSA, in air-raid shelters, factories, canteens and so on. But I don't think it could have occurred without what had gone on in the 30s.

However, the election of the Labour government in 1945 was to prove not the high-point of this 'cultural upsurge' but ironically its end-point. . .

That is true. The Labour Party itself didn't recognise the forces that had put it there and made it. The Labour government didn't do anything to develop these forces. They saw the election as purely political and they didn't go ahead to build on the forces that had brought it into power. Therefore those forces broke down over a period of years, and things apparently got back to the old simple Labour-Conservative thing, with the really exciting cultural initiatives that had been present in 1945 disappearing.

In 1949 the Communist Party organised a conference on culture at which you gave a discussion paper, severely critical of the classical 'base-superstructure' analysis of culture.

It was an effort to get away from a rather mechanical approach to the use of the terms base and superstructure. In that sense I think it was correct. There is a vital relationship between base and superstructure - that's correct - but I think it was being used in a superficial way so that the value of culture was not fully recognised. It was seen only as something coming out of the material forces, and not as playing an active part in a series of dialectical interactions. That was why I was attacking *that* model.

The Communist Party had been very successful in intervening in British cultural life in the 1930s and in the war years. Why do you think it minimised the role of culture in the 1950s?

It's hard to analyse that in any simple way. I suppose these notions were diverted

so strongly into the war that re-integration of the ideas in the new situation was difficult and there was a tendency to turn to direct political matters. There was a tendency to oversimplify the issues.

One of your most recent books was *The Crisis in Marxism*. Why did you write about this?

I suppose there are a number of reasons. Partly the feeling that marxism wasn't playing the part it should play. There was a tendency to get lost in points of controversy and so on. I wanted to try to break through to the fundamental points of marxism as opposed to going along those lines. The book does make an effort to get at what is marxism in our day.

On the face of it, it is a pessimistic book. . .

Yes. Probably that comes from the feeling that there'd



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been so many things from the 30s on, where one felt things were coming together politically and culturally, and they've all broken down again. Things today seem much weaker now than they were at any point then. I wanted to know how these elements could get together again. It wasn't just a matter of calling for them. That would just be talking to oneself. But, how could I do something to start people thinking about them again? •