

Lucky Jim and the Labour Party

DAVID MARQUAND

The spate of recent novels which started with the publication a few years ago of Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* has at last begun to receive critical attention. Some attempt has been made to assess their political significance. But these attempts seem to have ignored the point.

What the novels of Amis and Wain, and the play *Look Back In Anger* have in common is an attitude to life shared by many of the contemporaries of their authors, but frowned on by the Older Generation in both parties. Above all, they are characterised by bitterness: bitterness against the niceties and falsenesses of conventional bourgeois life, bitterness against the drabness and decorum of contemporary society, bitterness against the crude cynicism needed for worldly success in that society, and bitterness (more obviously in Wain and Osborne than in Amis) against the lack of a Cause to live or die or even make speeches and collect funds for.

There would be nothing important about this if it did not seem that these attitudes were widely shared. But they are. As an article in an Oxford undergraduate magazine puts it, "This is the only *Zeitgeist* literature we have, and (it is), readily accepted by those in their twenties and early thirties as an accurate picture of their lives". All one's personal experience of one's contemporaries, at universities and outside them, suggests that some at least of Lucky Jim's attitudes are shared by the overwhelming majority of those who think at all. They are certainly far more widely shared than either the ponderous philanthropy of the traditional Left or the conventional smugness of the traditional Right. As for the gallant alcoholic enthusiasms of Philip Toynbee's Oxford, they are even more dead than those darling *dodos*. The only alternative to Lucky Jim—among the intelligent—seems to be escapism into the technical intricacies of linguistic philosophy.

Feeling for causes

There is nothing particularly new about any of these attitudes, taken alone. Writers and young men at universities have always been bitter about the smugness of bourgeois life. Professor Walsh and his idiotic cultural evenings, his stupid attempts at a bogus intellectualism, is only an unusually clever caricature of a type frequently caricatured. Bitterness against the drab monotony of Welfare State Britain is commonplace, though one usually finds it coming from different quarters than university dons who owe their own education to the Welfare State. Bitterness against the cynicism and vulgarity of the *nouveaux riches* are again commonplace among young men who may be *nouveaux* but are not yet *riches*. But all these bitternesses are not usually found together and especially not with the last: bitterness against the lack of a Cause. In fact, what these angry young men are most angry about is that they have nothing on which to focus their anger. They

are like the reservists who grumbled early this summer at having nothing to do: young, good cannon fodder in the right war, excellent raw material for demonstrations or campaign organising, they have nothing to demonstrate about. They are an army waiting for a flag—and they have waited so long that they have become a rabble.

This is where the second part of the title becomes relevant. Twenty years ago, the Cause was Left parties of various kinds, mostly the left wing of the Labour Party, or the Communist Party and its front organizations. But the Labour Party today generates none of the enthusiasms of the thirties. Occasionally, as in the recent Suez crisis, its leaders can appear to speak with the old voice of righteousness, sending delicious draughts of adrenalin through the bloodstream, spurring their listeners out into the streets to yell "Fascist" at mounted policemen. But already, that feeling is over. The party has returned to its normal self. Its leaders are once again less reminiscent of prophets with a message straight from the Lord than of rural district councillors worried about the drains. As for the Communist Party, since the Nazi-Soviet Pact, none but the psychopathic have been able to follow its twisting line for longer than a few months. Neither of these provides the Angry Young Man with his focus.

Itching for issues

The organizational barrenness is equalled by an absence of issues. Twenty years ago, there was drama, politics was conducted in banner headlines: hunger marchers charged by the police; socialists beaten up in Paris; Fascists victorious in Spain; decency butchered in Germany; honour betrayed in the chancelleries of all Europe. Now there are occasional moments of rage at isolated incidents. More often, it is a question of soberly weighing up the pros and cons, deciding on a complicated calculus of principle and possibility where guilt should lie, and where it is safe to let it lie. In internal politics, it is a question of balancing the rights and claims of competing interest groups—and as for the few who are still almost starving, nobody notices them, for they are too few or too old to march *en masse* to Trafalgar Square.

In these circumstances—bitterness with nothing to be bitter about; desire to march with nowhere to march to—two solutions are advanced. The first, the respectable right wing solution, is simple: "What the hero of *Look Back In Anger* needed", said a middle-aged! friend of mine, "was a good kick in the pants". The Angry Young Men themselves admit—it is even one of their major complaints—that there is no longer anything to feel blazingly indignant about, no progressive Cause to support. In that case, what are they binding about? Why can't they settle down to their jobs, do their duty, stop all this unhealthy self analysis, and get on with it? There is a lot to be said for this. If

indeed nothing is radically wrong with society, why keep worrying about the silliness of people who play Mozart concertos of an evening, instead of boozing at the local? You can't pretend Professor Walsh is a wicked bloodsucker of the working masses—the working masses are happily glued to the telly. So why not let him enjoy his culture? After all, there's nothing really wrong with liking Mozart.

"Superfluous" or engaged?

This solution ignores the essential nature of Lucky Jim's predicament. For Lucky Jim marks a new social type in this country: the intellectual. Continental countries have had an intelligentsia for some time. Until recently, we never had one. The characteristic of the intelligentsia—most of all in the country where the word was coined—is that it should be cut off from society. Until now, though there have been educated people in England, they have been part of society. Education at the University level was adjusted to the preparatory-public school apparatus. The man with a University degree was—by definition, otherwise he could not have gone to a University—a member of the ruling classes, at least fairly well off financially. In going to the University, he had not cut himself off from local and family roots. He owed his position to family, money or influence, not merely his own brains. He had the same manners, the same accent, the same values, the same instinctive attitudes as almost all the members of the Higher Civil Service, the legal profession, even Big Business or Parliament (traditionally more open to talent than the first two). In nineteenth century Russia, for example, this was not the case. The result was the "superfluous man" of Russian literature—a superfluous man who in the end got so bored that he destroyed the society that gave him nothing constructive to do. Lucky Jim is the English superfluous man. The opening of new educational opportunities has given university degrees to people who have cut themselves off from home and family in order to get them, who are obliged when they return home during the vacations to talk a different language from the language they talk at university. Such people are banished from the class from which they come. But they cannot just accept bourgeois decorum, patiently acquire the table manners and speaking voices of the languid young smarties they meet for the first time opposite them at the Oxbridge dinner table. To do so would be treachery to their own backgrounds and their own earlier selves. More: it would be treachery to their own values—for what the upper classes so often fail to realise about the lower classes is that they're glad they're not the upper classes, and regard a Wykehamist accent not as an accomplishment to be envied, but as an affliction to be pitied. Lucky Jim is forced by his own history to be an outsider and a critic: until this country becomes wholly egalitarian he can be nothing else.

The other solution is that of the traditional Left. It is noticeable that the most strenuous disapproval of *Lucky Jim* has come from the organs of the middle-aged progressives, notably from that ageing prima ballerina of the Social Revolution, the *New Statesman*. How irresponsible, sigh these respectable repositories of socialist virtue, these young men are. Here we spend years of our lives patiently building up a Welfare State

to send poor lads to Universities, and the poor lads concerned turn on us and bite the hand that fed them. What Lucky Jim should be doing, is joining the Labour Party and working off his neurosis in well-directed social activity. If he doesn't like the bourgeoisie and its smug complacency, let him join the only party that promises the euthanasia of the rentier. If he dislikes the cynicism and vulgarity of the *nouveaux riches*, let him work for the elimination of the profit motive and the economic system that produces *nouveaux riches*. The real trouble with Lucky Jim, says this analysis, is that he is a coward. He is frightened by the difficulties facing the social democrat in the mid-twentieth century, so frightened that he won't even try to face them himself. Twenty years ago, it was easy to be a socialist. All you needed was a well-developed social conscience, a good dose of humanitarian sympathy, a large bump of social guilt, and perhaps, for good measure, a powerful shouting voice, and arms well adapted to waving banners. Now it is infinitely more difficult. The Red Flag after all, mentions the flinching of cowards and the sneering of traitors as pitfalls in the path of the faithful: it says nothing about the blanket of indifference that the modern descendant of Keir Hardie has to contend with. Lucky Jim would have enjoyed marching and possibly even the heroic glow of volunteering for the International Brigade. But because canvassing on cold winter evenings in competition with the Telly is in the end a much more disheartening activity, and one about which it is almost impossible to write best sellers, Lucky Jim stands aloof, justifying his aloofness with vague charges that the parties of the Left have lost their drive. If they have lost their drive, says this analysis, wouldn't it be better to join them and give them a fresh injection of drive? The hardest and truest saying in the repertoire of historical clichés is that everyone gets the government he ought to get: if Lucky Jim objects to the system, then let him change it. Don't just stand there.

Intellectuals in politics

In a more subtle way, this analysis too forgets that Lucky Jim is primarily an intellectual, not a politician. Intellectuals want psycho-analysis. Processions are reasons from politicians. Politicians want power. Intellectuals want psycho-analysis. Processions are cheaper than psychiatrists—but they serve essentially the same purpose for the frustrated intellectual. Suppose Lucky Jim did join the Labour Party. In canvassing for the election of a Labour candidate he would not be working for the payment of higher pensions to the aged or the provision of better schools for the poor, but for the undoing of Professor Walsh and all the men like Professor Walsh who had made him feel inferior, boorish, and uncultured. Every envelope he addressed would be a blow struck at Mozart. Whatever rationalizations he indulged in, his political motives would be entirely different both from the clinical or ambitious motives of the professional politician, and from the economic motives of the ordinary man in the street, who—if he joins in political activity at all—does so to alleviate the poverty of his own and his neighbours' lives, or more rarely, to create a state of affairs in which such poverty shall be eliminated for ever.

Lucky Jim and the Labour Party

Of course, there have been times in History when intellectuals have joined Left parties for precisely these reasons, and have nevertheless become useful members of them, and have even succeeded in resolving their personal tensions in the service of a Cause outside themselves. The Russian intelligentsia is the obvious example; the French intellectuals of the Eighteenth century who dug the grave of the Ancien Regime, and then pushed each other into it, are perhaps another. Robespierre and Lenin were both intellectuals; and it is doubtful if they had time to be neurotic. But these periods have all been periods of mass tension as well. The Russian Revolution was planned by intellectuals, dreamed of by intellectuals, even led by intellectuals. But it was not made by intellectuals. It was made by the peasants, soldiers and workers of revolutionary mythology, the nameless strikers of the Putilov armament factories, and even more the nameless peasant soldiers who preferred to go home to take the land that had been stolen from them than stay and be killed by the bullets of German workers who had no more class interest in fighting the war than they had themselves. For those workers to succeed they had to have a symbol—and this was provided by the intellectuals; and they had to face a rotten society, and it was the constant wearing criticism of the intellectuals who had made the society rotten. But nevertheless it was they who made the revolution. Similarly, in the thirties, there had to be an effective mass movement for the intellectuals to join. That mass movement adopted intellectual slogans, read intellectual books, and sometimes secured the election of intellectual members of parliament. But what sparked it off was not the theorising of Strachey, not even the speeches of Cook, Maxton and the rest, but the facts of economic life. The recruiting sergeant for the hunger marches was near starvation, not the Left Book Club.

When, for economic reasons, the masses are suffering from resentment and bitterness against the structure of society as savage as that which the intellectual feels from the mere fact of being an intellectual and hence cut off from society, there comes what the communists call a revolutionary situation. The masses, starving, are willing to applaud and delude themselves into believing they agree with, the slogans, and theories dreamt up by the intellectuals to satisfy their own (very different) tensions and grievances. Between them, masses and intellectuals smash the brakes on the social engine, and there is a glorious crash and society takes a new agonising, pace forward.

The new situation

But this is not the situation in Britain now. The masses are emphatically not on the starvation level, or anywhere near it. Mass tensions exist; but they cannot be solved by revolutionary or quasi-revolutionary action. Social problems exist: but they cannot be successfully tackled in the spirit of "Toynbee-esque" chivalry. The social system today is as far from being satisfactory to any but the smug as it was in the nineteen thirties. Greed and selfishness are still the motive force of the economy. Stupidity still reigns triumphant in the administration. Democracy is still blanketed by the mass fatuities of the popular press, the maiden aunt gentility of the BBC and the emergent

vulgarity of Independent Television. The sheer survival of this country is at least as questionable as it was in the worst days of depression and appeasement. Industrial relations seem designed to produce the maximum friction, hampering production desperately needed if the country is to survive.

Foreign and colonial policy is framed by statesmen not merely blinkered but blind. An Empire is needlessly being thrown away because its rulers have not the imagination to retain it, but preserve the psychology of Poona and Cheltenham in an age when what is needed is revolutionary sympathies, understanding of other races, and an ability to appear to yield gracefully. If ossification and lack of imagination are the marks of decadent civilization, then for decadence this country must rival ancient Byzantium.

To remedy this situation revolutionary changes will be needed. And it is essential that the changes necessary are clearly thought out *before* the Party comes to power: they cannot be adumbrated *ad hoc* when Labour is already in office. Thus, the real task of the Party in the next few years is thinking, and planning. For this, Lucky Jim is unfitted. The chaos of contemporary Britain can only be cleared away by social salvage units, not neurotic misfits cut off from society. Similarly, the necessary changes will be less easily carried out in an atmosphere of quasi-revolutionary mass excitement. For the first time, a Labour government will have to carry out policies *against* the immediate vested interests of the organized working class.

In other words, the prerequisite of helpful intellectual participation in politics is missing; and the nature of what has to be done is such that the sort of contribution the intellectual can make is out of place. If Lucky Jim tried to take a hand in politics at the moment, he would either waste his time, or ours. He would either try vainly to recreate the atmosphere of the thirties, growing desperately dispirited in the process; or he would try successfully, and steer Left wing politics firmly onto the wrong track.

All that is left

So, all that is left is the sterile carping that he already indulges in. But is this altogether as sterile as it looks? On the surface certainly, there can have been few more futile forms of literature. The Aunt Sallies being bombarded are so pitifully unimportant: Mozart, good manners, conventional religion, academic insulation from the world, the drabness of the Welfare State—it is like a literate version of Gilbert Harding.

This criticism forgets that it is precisely on this pitiful, trivial, level that people live. More important, it forgets that apparently sterile carping may be of great use. I have already listed a number of serious ills from which present day society suffers; at the risk of seeming unduly Cassandraesque I shall mention one more. Society today, as well as being a Welfare State, is in danger of becoming a Complacent State. The Soviet Union where criticism of the regime is impossible, where good ordinary healthy pessimism is punishable, where the recent performance of Hamlet was commended because it presented the play as an exercise in optimistic facing of the facts, and played down the morbid tragic element, is only the most perfectly developed specimen of the Complacent State yet evolved. But the USA runs it pretty close. All the

David Marquand

pressure of competitive high pressure salesmanship, most of the educational process, most of the personal individual pressures of early environment seem almost designed to produce a people unable to criticise itself. It seems almost as though mass civilisation, and the complex technological and economic organization on which it depends, is inseparable from social conformity. But in that case our future is bleak.

One of the ways in which this future can be held off, if not prevented, is continuous criticism of every aspect

of society. Even the fatuities of the Beaverbrook Press perform a useful function for they keep Left wing politicians and institutions like the British Council on their toes. Novelists like Kingsley Amis do the same. Some of the targets of this school are pretty small: but they are pernicious just the same. And by keeping up a constant fire of criticism on such pernicious targets we are all kept awake. And, as some great thinker surely ought to have said even if he didn't: the greatest enemy of freedom is sleep.