

Socialism and the intellectuals

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The aftermath of resignation from the Communist Party is not the best time for writing articles. Silence would be more comfortable. For nearly a year I have found myself caught in the cross-fire of a divided world. In the last, not very genial, months of my party membership, the positions which I was defending (and which others are still defending within the Communist Party) were under fire as "liberal", "idealist", "abstract", and so on. The fire which any Communist intellectual draws from the other side is well-known. It is because this predicament is of more than personal significance that I am writing this article.

First, I must seek to free myself from some of the clichés associated with "Resignation from the Party". Withdrawal from the extreme left has been a central motif within our culture ever since the French Revolution left the Solitary meditating upon a creed—

*"That, in the light of false philosophy,
Spread like a halo round a misty moon,
Widening its circles as the storms advance".*

Since the 1930's the motif has been repeated with monotonous insistence. The "rejection" of Communism, or Marxism, or Belief in Progress, is now a trivial routine affair.

The Resignee now has a shabby, walking-on part in the contemporary cast. It is assumed that he must make certain stylised gestures—loss of faith, anguished self-analysis, disillusion in political action. The routines are well-known, although the final postures are various; the inhabitant of political limbo, caught in a conflict between guilt and disgust; the strident anti-Communist, taking revenge upon his own youth, making good as a literary nark or Labour MP.; the convert to Holy Church. For the onlookers (if I may change the image) the public resignation from "the Party" serves the functions of a ritual sacrifice in tribute to the liberal Gods. And the *Manchester Guardian* inscribes the blood upon its priestly tablets.

The liberal Gods—justice, tolerance, above all intellectual liberty; but not the humanist Gods of social liberty, equality, fraternity. These stubbornly remain on the Communist side. That is why—although I have resigned from the Communist Party—I remain a Communist.

The logic of anti-Communism

Dogmatic anti-Communism, which begins by rejecting certain ideas or reacting against certain events, and which ends by rejecting or condemning hundreds of millions of *people*, is bound to lead on to despair. Analysis must commence with historical actualities; and first with the multitudes of human beings whose aspirations are expressed in terms of Communist thought and political organisation. Those who allow disgust with the illiberal and authoritarian features of orthodox Communism to dominate their outlook, only too often end up by damming up within themselves the profound and active sympathy called forth by those epics of human achievement led by Communists in our time: the march of the Chinese 8th Route Army; the Yugoslav war of resistance: repeated feats of conscious social endurance and constructive labour: the real onslaught upon illiteracy and superstition: the first steps in the regeneration of peoples oppressed and anonymous through centuries.

The conflicts which matured within world Communism in 1956 are surely sufficient to have shattered the old simplified picture. It is no longer any good whatsoever to lump together all the contradictory phenomena of Communist-led societies as a Good Thing or a Bad Thing. But it seems to me that intellectuals in this country have been slow to grasp the inner significance of these events. The post-war generation is appalled at the carnage and confusion of the past two decades; it sees only—

*". . . the sacrificed of history's
great rains, of the destructive
transitions",*

and ignores the character of the transition itself. Too many are trapped in that movement of thought

and sensibility which—commencing with the abstract rejection of Communism—leads on to the retreat from humanism.

This retreat from humanism is perhaps the most striking feature of our intellectual life today. It is already sapping our labour movement of vital intellectual and cultural energies. It could lead on to more serious consequences, which in turn could provoke a strong anti-intellectual current amongst our working-class. Anti-Communism has inflamed international relations for long enough; but we have not yet begun to take stock of the damage which it has done to our own cultural and political life. And, to turn the coin over, the rejection of liberal values by the "Stalinists" has led the world Communist movement into crisis.

Retreat from Humanism

This retreat from humanism takes many forms: in some, a reluctant, apologetic shuffle: in some, a jog-trot: in some, a shameless, self-inflated gallop ("Other people are the trouble"). The pace of all, the shufflers and the gallopers, seems to me to have accelerated significantly since the events in Hungary.

The ground-bass of this theme is sounded in a passage from a letter to the *New Stateman* last June, which I select not for its subtlety but for its self-revelation:

"The example of Sweden, with its problems of excessive drinking and its high suicide rate, has shown that the introduction of the most advanced forms of welfare do not necessarily make man more content or better behaved. This is not used, of course, as an argument for abolishing all forms of welfare, but it would seem to indicate that welfare and equality on its own are not enough.

"Experience of the last decade has shown that many of the rich and artisan and working classes are each out for all they can get, whether in the form of dividends, more wages, or subsidies . . . The sufferers have, of course, been the traditional custodians of morality and unselfishness, the fixed income

groups, who continue to live lives cramped and poverty-stricken in comparison with their fellows who wax rich on capital gains, swollen dividends, inflated wages, and overtime earnings".

What Sort of Life

Some lines of the melody are to be found in a letter which I received recently from a friend:

"What sort of life will the scientific socialist life produce when it has 'solved the problem of the means of production?' I don't suppose the socialist and communist leaders would have any better answer than the leaders of the T.U.C. if they were asked, 'what is the good life?'—'when you have your automatic factories, atomic power, good plumbing, and a car for everyone and your seven hours leisure a day, *what do you do with your time?*' (In Sweden where they are very comfortable, the suicide rate is higher than the accident rate)".

It is difficult to know how to dig in one's heels on this muddy slope, whose grass has been rubbed off by the traffic of centuries. When Blake came across the line (in Bishop Watson's *Apology*), "The Wisdom and Goodness of God, in having made both Rich and Poor", he scribbled the annotation:

"God made Man happy and Rich, but the Subtil made the innocent, Poor. This must be a most wicked and blasphemous book".

It is difficult to *argue* about values: they are either affirmed or denied.

One might question the validity of conclusions based on the experience of *one decade*—although this is now being done on every side, from predictions as to the stability of capitalism, to conclusions as to the sinfulness of man,

Or one might enquire more closely into the mentality of the "traditional custodian of morality and unselfishness" who cannot conceal his envy at the improved material status of the working-class, and who finds it difficult to refrain from advocating the abolition of "all forms of welfare". And what is the significance of the word, "custodian?" It suggests that the subject is *guarding* "morality and unselfishness", rather than practising these virtues in any active sense. If so, from whom is he

guarding them? From the working-class? Or from materialism? And if from materialism, why should the custodian expect a hefty material reward for his services? Perhaps, after all, it is the "fixed income" and the pre-war wages-salary differential of which he is custodian?

The Suicide Rate in Sweden

So let us get to the crux of the matter, which appears to be the suicide rate in Sweden. I don't know how long this colossal fact has been in circulation, but recently I have tripped over it in the most unlikely places.

Do we need to examine the credentials of such a shifty, scarcely literate fact as this? Who commits suicide in Sweden? Why? Is the suicide rate an authentic index of anything at all? What particular tensions exist within Swedish social and cultural life? How do we know that the suicide rate has got anything more to do with material well-being than the obvious fact that welfare services diminish the economic pressure upon the unhappy to continue the drudgery of bread-winning? Might it not equally be related to some spiritual exhaustion within Swedish culture, a shame-faced, parasitic well-being purchased while half Europe burned, a culture which has no heroic soil in which to take root?

I don't know the answer, and neither do those who throw this "fact" into the anti-humanist balance. But until this fact passes some such examination it is not a fact at all: it is a noise. The noise goes like this:—Sweden's welfare state, wealthy working-class, social-democracy = gin and suicide. Welfare = suicide. Wealthy working-class = suicide. *Hydrogen-bomb*.

Human Condition

The question of particular human beings taking their lives in particular circumstances in Sweden has nothing to do with the phrase. It is a noise made by people who are falling into certain contemporary attitudes; who oppose "life" to "politics", which is felt to be something other than life; who oppose the 'good life', which is something inward and passive, to the outward life of social relationships; who are genuinely but confusedly repelled by the corruption of

the human spirit by the mass-produced values of commercialism, but can see no social force strong enough to stem this corruption. Concern with the Swedish suicide rate is generally associated with a readiness to discourse on the Human Condition, but not to consider the conditions of any particular set of human beings; to talk of the Problem of Man at the same time as most of the problems of men acting in history are given up as irrelevant. As the slope becomes steeper, we find a wholesale dismissal of most human goings-on since the Renaissance. At the bottom we find Mr. Colin Wilson sitting beside Bishop Watson, up to their necks in metaphysical mire:

"Then, as the Outsider's insight becomes deeper, so that he no longer sees men as a million million individuals, but instead sees the world-will that drives them all like ants in a formicary, he knows that they will never escape their stupidity and delusions, that no amount of logic and knowledge can make man any more than an insect; the most irritating of the human lice is the humanist with his puffed-up pride in Reason and his ignorance of his own silliness".

Inhibitions of Kingsley Amis

I am not going¹ to argue with Mr. Wilson, since it is my silliness to seek the significance of man's life within terms of those human ends and values discovered by men in their own history; while it is his silliness to be interested in the reverberations of his own ego as he walks through a library. But I *am* concerned when I find Socialists gingerly setting foot on the upper slopes of the Bishop's glide; and such a one is Mr. Amis—the pamphleteer, I mean: the novelist is another matter.

There are parts of Mr. Amis's recent pamphlet which bristle with inhibitions against the affirmation of positive, humanist values. When he uses the words "hopes and aspirations" he must protect himself with a self-conscious giggle ("to coin, a phrase"); slip, slap, slop go the frayed carpet-slippers as they shuffle away from the fire. But I feel it to be a *reluctant* shuffle, all the same. Mr. Amis would like to turn back and warm his hands—or at least the seat of his trousers.

Then I am a prejudiced witness, I am enough of a Party man still to be riled by the picture of Mr. Amis telling a Fabian, Week-End School that it is "too easy to laugh" at the intellectuals who went to fight in Spain. It appears that they were motivated by an amoral romanticism, "wicked out of a kind of folly". (See section, "Marxism and What It Meant"). This is supported by a line from Auden, and a gloss from Orwell. The line is out of its wider context, and the gloss is on Orwell's spleen and not on the poem. Auden was never in any serious sense a Marxist. As Mr. Amis points out, he did not fight in Spain. As for the Marxist's "taste for violence", are we not forgetting that violence, war, and terror were a condition of life, not only for Marxists, but for all who opposed fascism over a great part of Europe twenty years ago? My recollection is that those who went to Spain, and those who supported them in Britain, spent much of their time in warning of the dangers of a flood of violence if the Spanish lesson went unheeded. Further, if we are to talk in a large way about romanticism and irrationalism in the Thirties, it is worth recalling that intellectual liberty—high-lighted by the murder of Lorca—was one of the first issues which intellectuals believed to be at stake in Spain.

I wish we could talk about things in the right context, and use the right terms. The Spanish war was a *war*: it is an event in history. There was a rebellion by a military junta. The country was flooded with Moorish soldiers, Italian and German troops and war material. The majority of the Spanish people took up arms, and appealed to the world for assistance. Our Government was for new-assistance, but some hundreds of our people volunteered to go. No doubt there were as many motivations as there were volunteers, but most of them believed—or thought that they believed—that if Franco was halted, it would appreciably lessen the danger of world war. A few hours before Ralph Fox was killed he did not talk about his taste for violence or his old headmaster. He said: "If any of you get back, tell the people of England that the fight in Spain is not only Spain's fight, but England's". I think that this was true, and that Fox spoke not as a romantic, but as a political realist.

It is natural that Mr. Amis, the novelist, should be interested in questions of motivation. It is also true that "Spain" was a literary and political *symbol* of varying connotations. And I certainly think that political theory should concern itself with personal motivations, and that the blind eye of orthodox marxism in this respect has brought it to the verge of bankruptcy. In the past few months I have had a stomach-full of the word "objective", now being worked overtime by the Stalinist old-guard to defend the *status quo* against whatever is new and potential.

Spain: The Act of Choice

But it still seems to me that there is a region where it is proper to consider events, actions and the consequences of actions; another region where it is proper to consider motivations; and yet another where we must consider the inter-connection between the two. Not only Mr. Amis, but scores of others, right, left, and centre, are continually sliding—without giving warning, and probably without knowing it themselves—between these regions. This results not only in confusion; it leads on to denial or distrust of the validity of intellectual motivations, to the obliteration of the boundary between rational choice on the one hand, and psychological or economic determinism on the other. If men went to Spain, believing that certain events were taking place and that certain consequences would flow from their actions, it seems to me that we are less than just, and we diminish the human stature, if we ignore the conscious act of choice. Plenty of other men in the Thirties revolted against authority, had a taste for violence or adventure, and so on; they did not go to Spain, but became speedway riders, or acrobats, or secret service men. Such speculation may take us some way towards understanding the temperamental predisposition to take certain choices; nothing about the act of choice itself. Goodness knows the human reason and conscience are imperfect instruments enough; they glow fitfully amongst the bric-a-brac piled all around, which threaten at any moment to topple over and extinguish their light—self-interest and self-esteem, indigestion, guilt, class conditioning, memories of the wood-

shed, old superstition, the lot. But we continue our intellectual work because we believe that, in the last analysis, *ideas matter*; it is man's business, if he is not to be the mere victim of involuntary reflexes or of a predetermined historical flux, to strive to understand himself and his times and to make reasonable and right choices. This gives to all our imaginative work a significance at once terrible and hopeful.

But Mr. Amis leaves us floundering in a miasma of involuntary motivation. "Loving what is established and customary pulls you to the right; hating it pulls you to the left". Fair enough., But reason, will, moral passion do not enter; it is a matter of involuntary responses to external stimuli; love and hate are questions of "temperament only". "And behind that again lies perhaps your relations with your parents". Intellectuals went to Spain because they quarrelled with their daddies; now their own children are quarrelling with *them*. And so to our definition of political romanticism: "an irrational capacity to become inflamed by interests and causes that are not one's own, that are outside oneself". Oh, hell. It's time we opened some windows. The fog "inside oneself" is becoming thick enough to cut.

The Intellectuals Disengaged

I don't know why I am quarrelling with Mr. Amis—he is neither a relative nor an old housemaster of mine. There are other places in, his pamphlet where, with a sort of apologetic honesty, he defends old humanist positions. But in the passages which I have cited it seems to me that he closely reflects the dilemma of many British intellectuals. On the one hand, they are united upon one article of faith: the defence of intellectual liberty. On the other, there is a general lack of conviction as to the power of ideas to influence political events or social development. Through half the world the intellectual is seen as an explosive, seditious, unstable element. In Britain the intellectual feels himself to be impotent. No-one bothers whether his thoughts are dangerous or not.

Today it seems to me that the circuit by which ideas are transformed into effective social energies has been broken, by the withdrawal of the intellectuals on one side, and

the bureaucratic structure of the labour movement on the other. To justify the view that it is the working-class which holds the master-key which can unlock the doors of human change (I would say "progress" if the word were not in disgrace) would involve arguing the case for socialism from first principles. But if this is granted, then we have a clue to the understanding of why intellectuals in Britain today feel themselves to be impotent, treasuring intellectual liberty but in a social void.

In the Thirties (despite follies and illusions) this circuit was *open*. Points of contact existed in the Left Book Clubs, the Communist Party, the Unity Theatres the International Brigade, journals like *New Writing* and *Left Review*, which made possible an invigorating two-way flow of ideas and experience between a significant group of intellectuals and the most politically-alert section of the labour movement.

Today increasing numbers of young intellectuals feel themselves to be rebels against "the Establishment": the slavery of the human soul to material trivia, the hypocrisy and tedium of political life, the debasement of standards by monstrous, sprawling, impersonal money-making media, the acceptance of mass-slaughter which retches in the speeches of "statesmen" and which helps to under-pin our economy, the futile extinction of generous or dignified aspirations in the morass of expediences, competing self-interests, bureaucratic power-blocks. But since they can see no social force capable of making headway against this flux, their "revolt" consists in imagining themselves to be "outside" this thing, posturing and grimacing through the window. In fact, they are outside nothing but the humanist tradition.

Why, asked Engels over a hundred years ago, do workers strike against reductions, even when the uselessness of the strike is evident? "Simply because they *must* protest against every reduction, even if dictated by necessity; because they feel bound to proclaim that they, as human beings, shall not be made to bow to social circumstances, but social conditions ought to yield to them as human beings".

It seems to me that some of our younger intellectuals are beginning to strike, but as yet they are only striking *attitudes*. To do more than

this, they must leap the gap which divides ideas from social energies. And this means, in the last analysis, opening new circuits between the "intellectual" and the people, in particular working-class people.

Neither Casuists nor trimmers

How, then, are we to leap the gap? I no longer believe that this is accomplished by joining anything. I have gained enormously from the friendships I have made in the Communist Party, and the experiences of active political life. But I think that a final point of crisis has come when Communist intellectuals, if they wish to continue with creative intellectual work, must leave the party; in this country certainly, if the forthcoming Congress fails to effect major changes; in other countries the choice will present itself differently. They must do this not simply because the party is sectarian and so isolated from people that their effect is neutralised; nor because it is unpopular to be a Communist (we have put up with that for a good many years); but for two more cogent reasons. First, so long as the party persists in its official blanket endorsement of the Soviet leadership, and all public expressions of dissent are regarded as offences against discipline, they are guilty of a breach of solidarity with those who are fighting for intellectual liberty in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. True, this is not a new problem, but it is presented with a new urgency: Communist intellectuals *above all* should make their voices heard in protest against the exile of Lukacs and the arrest of Harich. Second, in a period of such significance for socialist theory as this, they can no longer waste time and energy in the toils of a bureaucracy which demands everything from them, from stamp licking to *Daily Worker* selling, *except* honest intellectual work; which hedges ideas around with dogmatic anathemas, and inhibits their expression with disciplinary measures.

Nor do I think that the problem is necessarily brought nearer to solution by joining the Labour Party. Too many intellectuals who join the Labour Party seem to get swallowed up in seas of expediency. They concern themselves not with what is potential but with what is in the short-term, politically practic-

able. Will the voters wear it? Will it get proscribed? The logic of such "realism" is that they commence "rethinking", which too often means thinking about ways of patching up capitalist society, making it work more efficiently and with less pain to the people. They cease to think as socialists and neglect a great part of the work of socialist intellectuals, which I take to be that of helping people to become aware of the vast human potentialities—economic, intellectual, spiritual—denied or frustrated by capitalist society, helping people to change their ideas and values *within* capitalist society until they see and feel it to be the intolerable and wasteful system which despite the precarious modifications of the present decade it still remains. But unless this understanding of the aggressive character of imperialism, the self-destructive forces within capitalist society, is continually awakened; unless this sense of antagonism to the capitalist ethos is continually aroused; then it seems to me that past gains and future potentialities of the labour movement are always in danger of perishing in the sands.

The real and substantial gains of the Labour Government of 1945-7 were the product, not of the present "late-capitalist-society-is-all-right-don't-rock-the-boat" mentality, but of the understanding and spirit of antagonism which in great part was nourished by that movement of ideas in the Thirties which it is now fashionable to dismiss as "romantic". I am not suggesting that it is *inevitable* that the intellectual who works actively in the Labour Party will forget what he is doing it for, will cease to be a socialist intellectual and become a social worker, or a log-roller, or one of the boys. Perhaps there are new currents stirring which will change the position. I don't want to encourage precious attitudes towards politics; we all have political responsibilities and the experience of rank-and-file political activity enriches us and keeps our ideas on the ground, I am suggesting that our responsibilities as socialist *intellectuals* are not solved by joining organisations; and that at this particular moment neither the Communist Party nor the Labour Party provide a congenial atmosphere for setting on foot a principled movement of socialist ideas. We cannot serve the working-class or anyone else honestly as *intellectuals*

contrary, socialism would emerge from its iron and into its human age.

I do not know whether these processes will work themselves out in five years or fifty years, but I still think that this is a bad time of the human day for intellectual loss of nerve or for speculations on the rate of Swedish suicide.

I understand that George Lukacs—the outstanding Hungarian scholar, survivor of Bela Kun's government, a commander of the International minister in Nagy's government—has commenced in his Rumanian exile to write a work on socialist ethics. It seems to me that this old man has something to teach us of intellectual courage.

As long as the Communist tradition includes men like this, I want to remain associated with it. I am not going to spend years crippled by remorse because I was duped by the Rajk and Kostov trials, because I was a casuist here and perhaps an accomplice there. We were Communists because we had faith in the fundamental humanist content of Communism, and during the darkest years of the Cold War it was our duty to speak for this. I do not regret this, although I wish we had spoken more wisely and therefore to more effect. Now that the conflict within world Communism has come into the open, it is our duty to take sides.

And do not let us pretend there has been some easy solution to the political and moral conflicts of our time. The conflict between "liberal" and "humanist" values was not invented by social-democratic or Marxist theorists. It was an historical actuality. It existed on the map of the world, and within society on both sides of the line of division. Not only the world, but man himself was riven apart. Just as the denial of intellectual liberty brought down its revenge upon the Communist movement, so the denial of Communism, and of its humanist potential, has brought it own sickness into our political and cultural life. Hopes have been corroded away or have turned into sour dogmas mechanically upheld despite the evidence. Generous impulses have been denied as "romanticism"; just aspirations as "illusions". Intellectuals have lost confidence in the potentialities of the working-class, and the working-class has lost sight of its wider cultural perspect-

ives. On every side, human horizons have closed in.

That is why I think that this is a moment, not only for "re-thinking", but above all for *re-affirmation*. We must call a halt to this retreat from humanism. We must open out the horizons once more. We must affirm that politics is concerned with more than oiling and servicing an economic machine—adjusting and neutralising competing self-interest here or there—which no-one can control. We must affirm the thought which is central to Socialism—and which, above all, must unite intellectuals and the working-class in a common cause—that man is capable not only of changing his conditions, but also of transforming himself; that there is a real sense in which it is true that men can master their own history.

Socialist Humanism

The emergence of socialist humanism as an effective intellectual and political force in the Communist world seems to me to create the conditions for the rekindling of moral and intellectual passion in our labour movement also. This movement may, in the main, first find expression among intellectuals. But the labour movement will not be slow to welcome a movement of ideas which deals not only with credit manipulations and death duties, but which summons the people's own initiatives and energies in the transformation of their environment and of themselves.

A friend, who describes himself as a "left social-democrat", tells me that all this is visionary stuff. I am, he thinks, the victim still of the messianic folly of Marxism, the illusion of the perfectibility of man. The strength of organised labour, improved economic techniques, have between them assured a fair prospect of stability to "late capitalist" society. By and by the socialist sector of the economy may be extended. Meanwhile, there are "no short cuts". Socialists should be "realists", and get on with the work which lies about on every side: improving this and that, and above all restraining imperialism, whether Cyprus or Suez, and working to prevent world war.

Granted certain premises this is a reasonable position and it is certainly a humanist position. But it

is not the position of *socialist* humanism. It stems from the realism of the sociologist but not the realism of the poet, and socialist humanism seeks to unite the two.

Whatever Hegelian hangovers persisted in their thought, neither Marx nor Engels fell into the old, Utopian trap of faith in human perfectibility. Belief in the original virtue of man is as incompatible with mature socialist theory as is belief in original sin. What they both affirmed, and what we must re-affirm, is the *revolutionary* potentialities of man. We must regain this understanding, for, unless we have it, we can never summon the courage to make the potential, actual.

When we look backward through the bars of our own time, to Assyrian man, Athenian man, Aztec man, we gain a sense, not of human tedium but of human unexpectedness. Society can stagnate for centuries; it can assume monstrous shapes in the pattern of mental myths; but men can and do, almost without warning, take "short cuts". Can we be sure that 20th-Century-television-man is here to stay?

I hold fast to the view that men are on the margin where pre-history ends and conscious history begins. We will need all our nerve if we are to cross that threshold. I do not think that this implies Utopian myths of human perfectibility. A society without opposed classes will not be a society without social friction of many sorts; every vice, as well as every virtue, known to Shakespeare will still trouble the human soul. It will not lift from men's shoulders the responsibility, collectively and as individuals, to take actions and make choices in pursuit of the "good life". But it will free the act of choice from the dictation of necessity, from the history-old inheritance of blind, involuntary oppression and wasteful contests of economic self-interest within which all choices have been made. If men then chose wisely, they will open new vistas of communal enrichment, devising social arrangements which will foster the influence of "virtue" and limit the havoc which "vice" can do. And if the weight of evidence today seems to deny this hope, then we can still protest, refusing to be victims either of circumstances or of ourselves; for it is in this rebellion against fact that our humanity consists.