

Discussion—two

Commitment in Criticism

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FABIANISM stems from the realism of the sociologist, but not the realism of the poet: socialist humanism seeks to unite the two." E. P. Thompson offers this justification for remaining a visionary. Socialist thinkers, faced with the collapse of their old panaceas and the irrelevance of their old terminology to contemporary society, are strongly tempted to escape the consequences of the left wing "demise" by a poetic reaffirmation of faith in faith. Those who profess no interest in economics are usually those who have had their neat preconceptions upset by economists. But skill must be argued with, not snubbed.

None the less, there is more to the socialist thinker's concern with culture at the present time than wilful ignorance or downright laziness. All fruitful political thought starts from an analysis of contemporary society. There is no use for concepts of class, the class struggle, "capitalists-versus-workers" or anything else you choose—and *a fortiori* no point in basing a policy upon them—unless they emerge from this analysis.

Now whilst even the most outrageous Marxist acknowledges that our society has radically changed since the War, there has not been any satisfactory sociological analysis of the new Britain. All

that exists is a mass of disparate evidence obscured in the uncut pages of technical periodicals. The "political" importance of the novels of Amis, Wain and the plays of Osborne is that these works have partially filled the gap by giving expression to some of the prevailing moods of our society. Whether or not this was the purpose is irrelevant. As evidence for the sociologist and the politician, they are invaluable. The political intellectuals have, of course, demanded more of this literary movement. It is a common assumption—only partly justifiable—that the analyses made by Wain, Amis and Osborne are inadequate to the complexity of the predicaments they have described and the moods expressed. They don't just want to know that Jimmy Porter is what he is, they want to know why. What is demanded now is a literature in which the action develops out of a social background clearly mastered and dramatised by the artist: plays and novels in which the reader is made aware of the social forces which have conditioned the characters, how their attitudes towards and their reactions against society can be explained. Understanding is asked for, as well as feeling. The artist must have a grasp of sociology.

This demand springs partly from the

absence of sociological analysis, and the extreme difficulties of making such an analysis of such a complex society. It seems to be hoped that art will succeed where sociology has so far failed. But it does not altogether depend upon this mistake. For the political thinker, the artistic and the sociological approach to the analysis of society are complementary. The text-book approach is piecemeal, detailed and unemotional. For planning reform, the "realism" of the sociologist may be all that is required. The "realism" of the artist has a more general function. Art dramatises sociology (I am thinking here almost exclusively of the novel, play or film). The sociological study can show how people are grouped in society, how groups have arisen, what their attitudes are, how social and economic forces condition them, how individuals may react against their groups, or even the whole society, and why. The individual is considered here as thoroughly conditioned by his environment. But through the artistic "analysis" we come to *feel* what it is like for groups and individuals to live and react as they do. Put in another way, we are given imaginative insight. For example, no sociological study could give us as powerful an awareness—in the intended sense—of the problem of old age as the film *Umberto D.* But this insight into other people's lives, into the life of the society, is as *politically* necessary as the cool knowledge of the working society. After the last few months, it needs no Orwell to point the consequences of the "cool" approach to politics. A politics without art breeds inhumanity; contrarywise, a politics exclusively of art breeds romanticism or escapism.

These considerations offer sufficient reason for the current "political" preoccupation with an art that deals with contemporary society: but not perhaps for one which consciously analyses society. This second demand is often badly expressed. It is not that artists are asked simply to include a sociological analysis in their work. But an artist who has made no effort to analyse, is, obviously enough, in danger of falsifying the situations he is attempting to dramatise or describe. Either he may be inclined to offer the bogus solutions to the problems posed—a process by which the American cinema has ruined even its best realist films: or he may create a dangerously distorted picture of his society, by trying to see it only through the attitudes of the group or individuals with which he is directly concerned. In this case, although his work may be as comprehensive an expression as possible of the attitude of a particular group, it may fail altogether to give insight into the society as a whole. Certainly it is the artist's intensity of feeling for life which is his important contribution, in so far as he takes the role offered him here. But unless his feeling for character and situation is supported by thinking.

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they will fail in their topicality, and communicate only distorted insights.

Thus the type of art the socialist intellectual is demanding is an art which is not only concerned with contemporary society, but an art which springs from an *understanding* of society, and imparts a vivid feeling for life within it. As long as it is remembered that the phrase is defined as above, we may risk calling it "social realist art". Italian film directors have been its main exponents since the war, and De Sica's statement sums up the aim: "Most people do not want to see because the pain of others troubles them. We, on the contrary, want to see, our aim is to see".

Nothing could be more misguided than the common way of giving expression to this demand. It is claimed that social realist art fulfils the real or the true function of art. Those who are so inclined can haggle over the "general function of art" for all they are worth: a more limited but more germane claim should be made for social realist art—that it fulfils a vital social need, and one which the practical thinker and the politician and the intellectual feel especially. Limited in this way, the

demand can expect more serious attention than the lofty and largely vacuous claims made on its behalf.

Complementary to this mistake of pitching the claims of social realist art too high, is the mistake of expecting it to do too much. Talk of "commitment" can easily lead to this latter mistake. For an art that is committed to a particular creed—be it socialism or Christianity—may fail to fulfil the very need which we are asking social realist art to fulfil. Over-attachment to a Party of any kind, may well make the artist too prone to slanting the truth, rather than presenting the truth as he sees it. Creeds need propaganda: but the point we have been making is that propaganda of this kind is as fatal to social realist art, as it is fatal to sociology. Only two requirements should be made of the social realist artist and of his critic: that both should look at life seriously and sympathetically "in order to *see*".

It may appear that I have allotted to the social realist artist the too limited task of preserving the politician's sense of life and balance. This is the specially felt need of the political intellectual at this time: but the need is universal,

especially in a democracy where politics is everybody's business. Moreover, it must be stressed that I am taking the word politics in its broadest sense as the conscious effort to improve society and eradicate its injustices. The best statement of the task of social realism—using the phrase in the sense I have given—is Zavattini's remark "to reawaken the spectators to the responsibilities and dignity of the human condition". This is the "commitment" that is needed. People's ignorance or an indifference of their condition is the persistent enemy of reform. Optimism that this can be overcome is all that keeps the revolutionary revolutionary. At the end of Visconti's film ("*La Terra Trema*") of the struggle and failure of one family to break the exploitation of Sicilian fishermen by the middlemen, the fisherman "Ntoni, knowing he has failed, expresses his hopes of ultimate victory: "One day, though, people will understand that I was right. Then they will realise that the things that have happened to me, the losses I have suffered, have a meaning for them. We must learn to help each other, to work together. It is only then that we will be able to go forward."