

Socialism and the intellectuals—one

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INTELLECTUALS are in the news again. And a damn good thing. The mere fact that the word is being bandied about—wonderingly, argumentatively, scornfully—reveals that once again there is an awareness that society is not a self-regulating mechanism, but needs a direction, and people to give it one. The citizen is in trouble when he believes in experts, and on the right lines when he looks round for intellectuals. An expert is supposed to *know*, and we are disappointed when he turns out not to know about things concerning which no systematised knowledge, still less prediction, is possible.

The widespread discussion about Kingsley Amis' pamphlet, *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, was caused as much as anything else by its title. This was a favourite topic of the thirties. But, in many profound and encouraging ways, we are back in the thirties—we are alive again after the chloroform-sleep of Butskellism. So we are talking about intellectuals again, and dusting off our copies of Ralph Fox and Dmitri Mirsky. And plenty of ordinary folk, who would never call themselves intellectuals, are sitting up and taking notice, because they have become vaguely and disturbingly aware that the experts are failing them and these intellectuals may have got something after all.

Amis, it seems to me, is unaware (in the nicest and most modest way) of this situation. I don't know if he asked himself why he was invited to address a Fabian summer school in 1956, after nobody of his sort had received a similar invitation since the thirties. Be this as it may, he has not the whole thing arsy-tarsy. Instead of asking: "What attraction has the political world to offer the intellectual?", he ought to be asking: "What has the intellectual to offer the political world, and why is it beginning to feel the need of him?"

I contrast these questions for the sake of clarity, and if I left it at that clarity would become over-simplification. For if there is any relation between the intellectual and the Socialist movement, it is that of interplay. Unless both are gainers, neither can be, and the whole affair is off.

This is sufficiently evident from the similarity of the terms in which each, at various times, rejects the other. For Amis, the political world, and the Labour Party in particular, has nothing to say to him about the things that really matter. It doesn't provide him with a cause. It is easy to sneer at people who go round hunting for causes (and really, with Cyprus and South Africa and so on, the shortage isn't so appalling). But the sneer is shallow, for a cause is the one thing on earth, outside our private loves, that really is worth the full deployment of passion and effort.

But the practical politician abuses and rejects the intellectual for the same reason. He sees the intellectual as aloof from or incompetent in, the things that matter to *him*. We often forget that politicians have causes too, and are even capable of passion. It was a pretty big thing to replace the Poor Law by the National Insurance system, or even to ensure that eighty per cent of new houses were built for rent by council tenants. And what, says your politician, did the intellectual do to help in that? The answer is that, ten and twenty years before, they created the mood which made these changes seem important, if

only by a negative onslaught on things as they were. But once the politician got down to the job, the intellectual yawned, or said he couldn't understand all those figures, or that he was being robbed of a cause.

The case for the politician is forgotten because we have so many politicians who have no cause (and don't hunt for one either), who are achieving nothing. So you get the nasty, tub-thumping anti-intellectualism of Ernest Bevin, or Guy Mollet (who said recently that his party, the most barren and yet the most complacent on earth, "has no place for tormented intellectuals"). Lately it has been taken up by the Communists, just when it is dying down in the Labour Party. But it's not worth writing an article about. What is worth discussing is the relation of mutual need between the real, worth-while politician and the real, worth-while intellectual.

There is one other element in the tangle, and that is the actual enslavement of the intellectual by the political machine—in other words, Zhdanovism. I shan't say much about that, partly because we all know what to think of it, partly because it is a problem for Communists and not one which presents itself, save rarely and partially, in the main stream of British politics. Edward Thompson (*U. & L.R.* No. 1) is naturally at the peak of revulsion from it, and this leads him into some statements about the independence of the intellectual from political parties which he will probably not be making in a couple of years' time. But for the most of us the problems are different from those of Zhdanovism. They are just as grave, if less dramatically horrible. They are the dehydration of the intellectual and all his work by commercial forces, and the gulf between him and worth-while politics.

What defines an intellectual is his public position. It is the recognition that he has something to contribute, not to any segment of society, however important, but to society at large. Julian Huxley is an intellectual, not because he is a distinguished biologist, but because he writes books for the general reader, and of course because he is on the Brains Trust.

The intellectual, at his worst, is just a showman; at his best he is a counsellor, guide, and in time of need conscience and spokesman in the service of us all. It follows that the essential quality of the intellectual is not his intellect but the fact that he must to some extent be accepted in his public role, just as a film star has to be able to act a bit, though sometimes not much. Yet often the intellectual only appears in his public role through the game of getting lists of intellectuals to sign statements, appear on platforms, hold congresses, and even join leagues and organisations. It was always a bloody silly game, and not only silly, but fraudulent too. For a moment's thought shows that the function of the intellectual resides in his individuality, not to mention his independence.

Now, when playing the game of totting up intellectuals, it is a case of the more numerous they are the merrier, and consequently the broader the definition the better. I am not concerned mainly with the fact that some pretty dubious characters get roped in—or muscle in of their own accord. Far more important is that fact that the word "intellectual" is employed to cover two essentially different

types of person, who have in common the public function which makes their names worth begging.

Emotionals and rationals

Discussion of the subject would be helped, I suggest, by employing a sub-division, into rationals and emotionals. These terms are nearly as clumsy and hideous as "intellectual", and I should hate to think of their coming into general usage, but they will do for the present purpose.

Kingsley Amis is an emotional, a fact which is sufficiently clear both from his novels and from his pamphlet, which ought to be called *Socialism and the Emotionals*. I don't say this in any contemptuous way, but merely because the rational-intellectual would write quite a different pamphlet.

What stultifies not just the pamphlet but his whole attitude to politics is a very simple thing. He starts out from his political convictions, but these are in fact the least important thing about him—or to him. They have nothing to do with Amis the novelist and poet, but are those of Amis the citizen, and so they are no closer to the essentials of his life than are the political convictions of Joe Snooks the citizen, who votes Labour but really cares about (shall we say) his wife and kids, his garden and playing the trombone. It doesn't occur to Joe Snooks to connect his private enthusiasms with his politics. But Amis would very much like to bring his politics into a relationship with his imaginative life, if it can be managed.

However, the only thing an intellectual of any sort can give to politics is the assertion of values which are particularly his own, and which arise from his special abilities and activities. Edward Thompson, in his article, sees this very clearly. But then he goes on to reproach Amis for being an emotional instead of a rational, and to insist on his looking at politics as if he were the latter. The truth of the matter is that the values of the two types of intellectuals—like their ways of working—are different, though there is a good deal of overlap.

For the rational, I should have thought, what matters above all is the sanctity of truth. He is bound to oppose public lying, whether it intrudes in his own field of work, as with the Lysenko business, or whether it falsifies the facts about Suez or Hungary. The concern of the emotional with truth is less direct, since truth to him is far from literal or concrete. There is profound truth in an impressionist painting or a poetic metaphor, but it is not the same kind of truth as a chemical formula.

Again, the concept of planning makes a considerable appeal to the rational. He is repelled by the anarchy, the wastefulness, and the sheer amateurism of capitalism. The emotional is not much bothered about all this. An artist will probably think that it must be a rotten life working in a steelworks, whether it is run properly or not.

Nobody ever talks about it, but to me the ghastly thing about the society in which we live is that most people spend their lives doing things which they never wanted to do and which bore them to tears. I don't know what is to be done about it, since it is a characteristic of an industrial as opposed to a craft economy, but I think Socialists should search for ways of at least reducing it under Socialism. Now I may be doing them an injustice, but I don't imagine that this reflection would often occur to a scientist.

The value to which the emotional is committed above

all others, surely, is freedom. It is vital to him to create in his own way, and if he can't, then his life has no meaning, whether the frustration comes from Comrade Zhdanov or from a publisher, film or television producer, or Bond Street gallery concerned solely with the market. But the modern large-scale organisation of science means that the scientist is conditioned to subordinating himself to a big organisation, necessarily composed partly of non-scientists. So freedom, too, is of varying importance to the two types of intellectual.

Yet, as I have said, there is a good deal of common ground on all these points, and there are two values which matter supremely to emotional and rational alike. One is of course peace. The other is justice, which is the point at which freedom and truth meet. To punish somebody for something he hasn't done is an outrage on everything that matters to both scientist and artist.

The public function of the intellectuals is to express and incarnate the hopes and ideals which they themselves hold dear and which are also dear to the rest of the population. The ultimate aim is to build a society in which these ideals play a dominant part.

If intellectuals are once more in the news, if writers of ostensibly highbrow plays and novels are begged to write articles in the Sunday newspapers, surely this is the proof of a new realisation that human interests and demands are not limited to those that can be satisfied in directly material ways. The search is for the prosperity of Sweden—without the suicide rate.

For myself, I think that the failure of the Labour Party to voice these aspirations is just the reason why intellectuals should get into it. It is a failure that is fairly widely realised by now by all but the most bone-headed politicians, and a start has even been made with remedying it. After years of losing by-elections through taking the advice of hard-headed agents and organisers ("experts") to the effect that all the voters care about is the cost of living, the Party is now winning by-elections by talking about morality in government, which was really the issue at Suez so far as Britain is concerned.

Transport House treats intellectuals very differently from King Street. It is a case of King Log and King Stork, really. In the Communist Party intellectuals are overworked, dragooned, and ordered about; they are derided when rebellious, but extolled when obedient and useful. In the Labour Party they are viewed with the same suspicious bewilderment whatever they do. Talking about culture or science to the Transport House wheel-horse is like recommending a recipe for shish-kebab to a Yorkshire housewife.

This attitude has got to be busted, if only to get out some passable leaflets and posters. But of course what is really at stake is whether we are to get anything like Socialism from the next Labour government; and if so, whether it is to be a liberation of human energies or a new set of rules for a society organised on the lines of the North Thames Gas Board.

This is a very live issue in the Party, from what I see of it. I can assure Edward Thompson that there are plenty of new currents stirring, if that is what currents do. This is not fundamentally, because the Labour Party is more Socialist than the Communist Party, though it certainly is, in my opinion. It is first because the Labour Party is a battleground in which opposing trends are free to contend for leadership, not without some dirty punches

(to change the metaphor), but without an all-powerful umpire to stop the fight and give the decision as he pleases. And secondly because, after all, it is a pretty big party, and when there are new currents in the nation there must be new currents in the Party too.

Essentially the choice is between a society which exalts the values I have mentioned and a society which debases them—which Capitalism, Stalinism, and Gas Board Socialism do in various ways. Intellectuals, of both kinds, are bound to have something to say about this, not for the altruistic reasons which Kingsley Amis would like to find out and can't, but for their own sakes. Do we want a society in which we can go on being intellectuals, or a society in which we are expendable?

The application of this to the Labour Party is surely that the choice between the two kinds of objectives implies a choice between two kinds of part. The nearer we are to

winning the next election, the more obvious this becomes.

In making this choice the intervention of the intellectual is urgently needed and this is realised today not only by a growing segment of the rank-and-file, but by rather more of the professional politicians than you might suppose. What they ask in return is that the intellectual should sometimes, and in his own way, take an interest in the problems that will actually come before the next Labour Cabinet. I don't see that this is too much to ask.

So it's not really a matter of whether an intellectual becomes a casuist or a trimmer by joining the Labour Party. If he does, of course, he ceases to be an intellectual in the full sense of counsellor, spokesman, and conscience. But the real question is whether the Party, and above all the society which it will govern, are to be dominated by casuistry and trimming. If we aren't going to show our concern with that, then who the hell is?