

Socialism and intellectuals--two

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EDWARD THOMPSON seems to me completely justified in calling for a rallying to the "Socialist Humanist" position, on the one side from the sterile straightjacketism the majority of Communist intellectuals are now struggling out of, and on the other side from the coy touchiness of the disgruntled and disillusioned Labour-partist. The key, Thompson suggests, to the future development of the Socialist intellectual, is to be found in the opening of "new circuits between the 'intellectual' and the people, in particular working-class people."

This, of course, is also true, but is not saying a great deal. There are factors which are helping to prevent the opening of these new circuits, to which Thompson gives scant attention, and which need serious examination. It is no good dwelling on the attitudes of the intellectual towards (a) capitalist unpleasantness, (b) Welfare State disappointments, and (c) Stalinist abuses and impositions, without discussing at the same time what exactly in the existing relationship of the intellectual to the people, particularly the working class, stands in the way of the full development of a body of socialist humanist ideas and culture.

We must, in this connection, recognise the important obstacle represented, among others, by the widespread anti-intellectualism of various kinds in popular and working-class movements. There is a prevalent idea among militant working-class sections that the intellectual trying to work out the detailed elements of a socialist outlook is not contributing anything to the *real* need—a struggle against a particular government, employer or policy, and the campaign around a day-to-day socialist platform. Probably at no time since the British working class began independent political action has the working class had so little interest in ideas and discussions as over the past few years. It would not be enough to say that the Robert Owens and Bronterre O'Briens capable of filling a felt need have not appeared, because the face remains that the general condition of the working class and their inherited attitudes have not made any such need felt. Suspicion on the part of popular movements to theoretical discussion, to non-orthodox viewpoints and to

concern with cultural advancement, has led to the alienation of many intellectuals from such movements.

The Communist Party has played an important part in strengthening among the working-class Left the notion that a socialist outlook on the world in general is bound up with the Moscow Foreign Language Printing House, Emile Burns' *What is Marxism?*, the ephemeral "Daylight" and the *Daily Worker*. The attitude to an idea, idea-monger and idea-vehicle has therefore been widely conditioned by the individual's attitude to the authority of the F.L.P.H.-D.W. axis. Those working-class Communists who have remained untouched by recent events see, are encouraged to see, all honest thinking as betrayal. Those who reject the dogmas of C.P. officialdom and have either left the Party or remain in it with a view to cleansing it, still tend to view even discussion about socialism, socialist parties and policies with some impotence. "What are you going to do?" seems to many of them, as to a large body of the working-class Left, the question to end all questions. One of the essentials, therefore, is the restoration of ideas to a central position in the Labour movement.

In agreeing with Edward Thompson's appeal, therefore, for a "new two-way flow of ideas . . . books, pamphlets, and journals . . . cultural activities" etc., it is important to remember that there is a strong resistance among the sections he wants to reach to much that is not visibly utilitarian.

It is necessary now to assess as accurately as possible how far intellectuals have since the thirties shied away from constructive socialism because of resistances from the working-class Left itself. How many poets, musicians, students, teachers, lecturers, painters, playwrights, have been lost to the socialist movement not because of "betrayal", "social-democratic deviations", "bourgeois corruption" or "cash benefits", but—among other causes perhaps—because of the frenzied dogmatism of the Left, fostered above all by the Communist Party?

Edward Thompson makes a beginning in showing the kind of moves the intellectual needs to make from his side in breaking down the Left anti-intellectualism. The honesty of the intellectual's ideas and intentions will

be an important contribution. So will the discrediting of rigid Marxism and the bankruptcy of its Moscow warehouse. But most significantly, the emergence of a new, virile, united and tolerant Left-wing movement, breaking down alleged monopolies of Truth, will provide the basis for a revitalised approach to socialist thinking and cultural activity in general. It is essential for working-class militants to recognise that a Socialist intellectual is not some kind of device, to be tolerated only so long as he supports, complements and helps to publicise every foible of his

industrial brethren. I am not hinting at some new source of worker/intellectual feud, I am suggesting that the responsibility of the working-class militant is at least as great as that of the socialist intellectual (be his origins what they may) in opening the new circuits Edward Thompson is seeking. A clarification of this kind of problem on the part of the class-conscious working class is vital if Socialist intellectuals are really to abandon their various positions as office-boys, adornments or spectators of the Left.