

Socialism and the intellectuals--three

Charles Taylor

Two problems seem to occupy a central place in any discussion on "Socialism and the Intellectuals". The first is raised by the isolation of the intellectual from the workers and the Labour movement. The second arises from what Edward Thompson has called the "conflict between 'liberal' and 'humanist' values." The first problem is a perennial one for those in or on the fringe of the Labour Party, while the second has been posed in a particularly acute form for those who have been in, or in the orbit of, the Communist Party.

To pigeon-hole them, however as problems particular to certain political milieu would be to misunderstand their nature. The polemics between Social-Democratic and Communist intellectuals have often hinged on just this illusion, that each side believed it had "solved" the problem of the other. Communists told themselves that they were at one with the working class, while Social-Democrats pointed to the prostitution of values that their Communist colleagues were willing to undertake at the request of the Party bureaucracy. The events of the last year, however, have made more and more people feel that these polemics were essentially sterile, and that, what is worse, they obscured the central issues involved.

The intensity of each of these problems has in fact, tended to hide the importance of the other. The isolation of the intellectual from the political life of the workers, from the preoccupations of the Labour movement, which in Britain at least, most emphatically do not include ideas, is the context in which much of the behaviour, both of the intellectual and Lucky Jim, is to be understood. The former seeks or sought to close the gap via the supposed vanguard of the working class, while the latter has a sneaking and sometimes vocal contempt for both. But in one case and the other, the responsibility for serious intellectual enquiry or sincere following of insight into the values implicit in our political life is forgotten.

It is not necessary to dwell on the really tragic predicament of many intellectuals in the C.P. It is however necessary to try to draw the moral. It is clear that by refusing their vocation as intellectuals to speak the truth in the name of political necessity, they have not succeeded at all in bridging the gap between themselves and the workers. On the contrary, the treatises, articles, plays, novels, poems, symphonies, all cast in the official mode, avoiding all the heresies and appropriately didactic, formed, together with the government economic statistics, what the workers of Poland called the "dead language"—a self-enclosed system of lies which had lost consciousness of itself even as a deception.

Harold Silver seems to grasp this point, and then towards the conclusion of his letter, to let it slip. The workers are not, at least in the long run, grateful to the intellectual who prostitutes his thought in order to serve as somebody's propaganda mouthpiece. The "dead language" is, sooner or later, recognized for what it is. It can receive ultimately only the engineered applause of a C.P. gathering. The Socialist intellectual who "helps to publicize every foible of his industrial brethren" is not respected and perhaps least of all by the "industrial brethren" concerned.

If the problem of isolation from the masses cannot be solved by short-circuiting the conflict of values and accepting the role of a propagandist, it will not automatically be solved by a renunciation of this false path. As Harold Silver points out the labour movement's comparative lack of interest in ideas does not spring entirely from Stalinist abuses. The prevailing anti-intellectualism in many Left Circles stems also from the widespread belief that ideas are of no importance. The question to end all questions is indeed "What are you going to do?" And in this context it is clear that thinking is not counted as "doing" anything.

This question is a clear invitation to the intellectual to abdicate altogether. The terms in which it is cast must simply be refused. The implications are that Socialist intellectuals must justify their Socialism by producing some quick political return, that ideally they should be out canvassing or sending out circulars. Edward Thompson criticizes the Communist Party bureaucracy for "demanding everything (from intellectuals) from stamp licking to Daily Worker selling, *except* honest intellectual work". But many Socialists outside the King Street hierarchy would agree that this was not such a bad thing. Not perhaps for such sinister reasons, the C.P. demands on top of this a certain amount of dishonest intellectual work. Many other Socialists don't give a damn whether intellectuals think at all.

A too narrow conception of what it is for a Socialist intellectual to contribute to the Labour movement can prevent him fulfilling his real responsibility towards that movement, either by producing a travesty of his thought, or by not thinking at all. Socialism as an attempt to realize certain values in history is then well on the way, either to becoming the executioner of these values or to lose its path in the sands of established fact.

I think that Mervin Jones is right in pointing to the role the intellectual can play in pushing forward our understanding of the values on which our society should to perform the function. The need for serious and intelligent thought arises from the second important problem

that faces socialist intellectuals—the conflict between values which Edward Thompson points to. To give the intellectuals the function of proclaiming values is to assume a harmonious set of values as already there waiting to be uncovered. This assumption just doesn't seem to me to be valid.

All the foregoing is meant to endorse strongly the words of Edward Thompson that "talk of loyalty to the working class is mere sentimentalism unless we are clear that what we must be loyal about is the honest communication of the best intellectual work of which we are capable". (U&L R I p.35.) But I have to disagree with Thompson's statement of the values to which the Left should hold.

It is clear that "the conflict between liberal and humanist values was not invented by social-democratic or Marxist theories" (U&L R I p.36)—any more than the class struggle was. It is part of the human condition in this age. But at the same time, it is undeniable that Communism has done something to sharpen the conflict and block the solution because it would never admit that the conflict existed in its own camp as well. It then tried to close all dialogue on the subject by a sharp dose of cold-war blackmail. Admittedly, it was not alone in this practice. Both sides accepted the premiss of a generalized state of siege. From this they concluded that those criticizing the waste of free enterprise were responsible for the millions of deportations in the Soviet Union, or that those who doubted the correctness of the Rajk trial were guilty of plotting a new war. The absurdity was collective and almost general, but Communism had its part in it. Thompson himself repudiates this standpoint strongly: "I have had a stomach-full of the word 'objective'" (U&L R I p. 33), but it seems necessary to push the analysis a little further and to see what lies behind these attitudes. Thompson is perhaps too much in a hurry to reaffirm the values of Communism. For years Communist

intellectuals were silent where they should have spoken because they did not wish to damage the party. Communism then seemed to be an admirable synthesis, a system without fissure. One had to accept it all or reject it utterly. Hence if one was on balance in favour, it was best to remain silent. Now the yawning gap is there: the concept of Stalinism has been brought forward and the capture of the party by a bureaucratic leadership who hold on to power at all costs, even at the expense of jettisoning one by one the ideals implicit in Communism. Now that this contradictory element has been abstracted from the main body of Communism, considered as the philosophy of practice, it can again be thought of as a single unified system claiming our unqualified adherence.

But this line of thought seems to me illusory. Stalinism did not just add itself to Communism, it was not an external element deflecting the main stream of Communist development. In every real sense it has grown out of Communism. If it could simply be abstracted, then the conflict between values would be very much easier to resolve than Thompson himself seems to imply—easy to resolve theoretically that is.

This could be summed up by saying that Thompson's 'faith in the fundamental humanist content of Communism' should have been more shaken than it was by the Rajk and Rostov trials. The question has to be asked: What in Communism do these and other similar events force us to call into question? Just Stalinism? or also Leninism? perhaps something of Marx as well? I believe that these questions need to be answered in all honesty before we rush to disassociate ourselves from everything that the anti-Communists have said. If only because the answer to their anti-humanism will never be complete and convicting until our values have been properly purged in the light of this experience.