

Socialism and the intellectuals — four

Universities & Left Review Summer 1957 Vol.1 No 2

Rodney Hilton

THE problem of intellectuals in the socialist movement has two sides. One is, how can the socialist movement attract intellectuals to it? The other is, what special contribution can intellectuals make? Amis's answer is in part angrily and effectively answered by Thompson. But Amis's Fabian pamphlet is not so much the statement of an intellectual as an extended question that might have been put by any other *Daily Mirror* reader of whatever occupation, that is "What is there in it for me?" Amis has not been alarmed, as any intellectual, indeed any thinking man, should be at the inevitability of chaos in our lives so long as they are ordered by the ruling classes of the capitalist empires, both the down-and-outs and the up-and-coming.

Those intellectuals of the thirties and of the immediate post-war era who had any staying power did not enter left-wing politics because of romantic attachment to a cause not their own, but because being theoretically minded through their calling, the socialist (mainly Marxist) analysis of the world crisis made sense and gave hope. It still makes sense, but hope has been almost killed because some of the Marxists in power have duplicated in another idiom the unreason and bloodiness of capitalist imperialism. But hope need not die because, as Thompson

has argued, the year 1956 proved that the Communist world is not frozen stationary by its dogmatic culture bosses and its party bureaucrats. We have seen that there is no need to suppose that NATO and the Voice of America are the only alternatives to them.

I differ from Thompson in his view of the immediate political duty of the socialist intellectual in Britain. I think he is right to leave the Communist Party for two reasons. The first is that this organisation has now no possible role to play in making socialist society in this country, so utterly divorced is it from the wider Labour movement. The second is that by claiming the monopoly of the interpretation of Marxism—a claim unfortunately conceded to it—it has made it almost impossible to fructify socialist practice by the application of genuine Marxist principles to the crucial problems of the movement. Marxism, in the hands of the discredited theorists of King Street, has been turned into its opposite, becoming a mystique to sanctify the status quo, instead of a flexible, undogmatic, materialist method of socialist analysis.

But I think Thompson is wrong to stand aloof from the Labour Party and to advise others to do the same. The

Labour Party, whatever its bureaucrats might want it to be, is not simply a slick electoral machine for promoting ambitious politicians. It is still a mass movement of the British working class, without whose freely given support no social transformation will be possible. Socialist intellectuals must (whatever they do for a living) be social scientists, and as Marx has taught us, the contemplative attitude is the negation of the scientific. Our material is human beings, and we must be involved with their problems. Solutions through political action can never be deduced from axioms applied to situations external to us.

In the conditions of British politics I consider it to be the duty of the intellectual to give principled political allegiance to an organised party. This is the only way in which the intellectual's contribution will be accepted and will be effective. Anybody with any knowledge of the British Labour Movement will know how badly it has always needed the theoretical stiffening which can only come

from a native Marxism. This could be a major contribution from the intellectuals. Naturally the way in which they work in the Party depends both on them and the organisation to which they belong. They will not find out much about the problems of the movement if they are not involved somehow in its drudgery, though they should refuse to perform the ritual self-abasement that the Communist Party demands of intellectuals, whom, as we have seen recently, it treats as the class enemy. On the whole provided the intellectual does not shirk his share of local routine, the politically active socialist worker does appreciate that the best service that the intellectual can give to the movement is in his own field of theory. The British workers have fought hard for education and it is prized nowhere more than in the Labour Party rank and file. The socialist intellectual has only to show that he is giving back to the movement the fruits of the past struggles of the workers and he will be understood.