

Socialism and the intellectuals—a reply

E. P. Thompson

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'THE socialist intellectual may just as well be a miner or a trade union official as a don. But the fashioning of coherent ideas, the understanding of the complex phenomena of contemporary economic, social, political life, demands time, access to books, leisure, and submission to intellectual or cultural disciplines which it is extraordinarily difficult for the industrial worker, or, indeed, the average overworked teacher or general practitioner to attain to. Moreover, as Charles Taylor and Harold Silver point out, the social and political climate is such that the industrial worker who studies political theory, goes to a class in economics, studies poetry, or conducts a spirited propaganda for socialist ideas is less common than he has been for very many years. It is not much good blaming anyone for this. This is the political context within which we work, and things are just as tough for many trade union branch secretaries and political organisers. But it is a political context which heightens the contrast between the specialist and the practical political worker: the one supposedly living in a world of abstractions remote from action, the other "getting on with the job."

However, the fact that many branches of socialist theory have been forced back into specialist corners during the past ten years should not lead us into Mervyn Jones' identification of the "intellectual" with the specialist who bears a public character: "what defines an intellectual is his public position". Public showmanship is of course important for that very small segment of socialists who may now and then be invited onto a Brains Trust, or whose talents bring them into the limelight. But the rest of us, teachers or miners, housewives or students, who have special training or abilities and who are deeply concerned with socialist theory, are concerned with the more humdrum work of promoting a flow of ideas, information, etc., within the rank-and-file organisations of the labour movement, and among the people with whom we work and live. Mervyn Jones himself does this work excellently as a writer and journalist, and I am at a loss to understand how he fell into such a misleading definition.

This may be because he has lost confidence, as many have in the present social climate, in the importance of

ideas, of theory, for the movement at all. On one side (he seems to imply) we have the professional politicians, who are getting on with the job of changing the world: on the other, the intellectual for whom "a moment's thought shows that [his] function . . . resides in his individuality, not to mention his independence". I have thought about this for more than a moment, and I still cannot agree. His function is to strive to understand some part of the world, and to communicate his understanding; to form ideas, or to take part in intellectual, cultural, propagandist (in the old sense of William Morris—the honest and enthusiastic propagation of ideas) processes which communicate ideas and help in translating them into effective social action. Ideas are not the expression of "individuality" or "independence": this suggests that they are merely personal noises, forms of self-assertion or self-exhibition. It is true that the intellectual will produce shoddy or dishonest work if he abandons standards in the face of improper pressures, interior or exterior, party-political or self-interested: and true that the artist must follow his own individual experience. But this is not a definition of function, public or private.

Mervyn Jones seems to be influenced over-much by the Hollywood-romantic picture of the intellectual as the impractical outsider, the odd man out, the voice-in-the-wilderness. He thinks that this lovable eccentric who "incarnates" hopes and ideals has got "attitudes" needed to humanise Transport House. What the politicians ask in return (he says rather sternly) "is that the intellectual should sometimes . . . take an interest in the problems which will actually come before the next Labour Cabinet". Very good: I, like most socialists, whether intellectuals or not, am very interested in problems that come before Cabinets. For example, in the field of international affairs, I am interested in stopping H Tests, banning the bomb altogether, cutting war expenditure by a half (to begin with), dismantling NATO, sending the American airmen home, releasing Kenyatta and tens of thousands of other Kenyans, and so on. I know as well as Mervyn Jones does that the Labour Cabinet before which these problems will come will do none of these things except under tremendous popular pressure. This is partly because

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most of its members will be concerned with power expediency and self-esteem (capitalist politics) and not with people (socialist policy): partly because they meet power-contingencies as they arise, are not guided in their actions by principled socialist theory, and either have no ideas or have swallowed capitalist ideas and attitudes. In such a context, what should the socialist intellectual do? I do, indeed, think that this question—"What are you going to do?" is of crucial importance today. I think that he must do what he is best equipped to do: fight corrupt and power-drunk ideas: analyse honestly and thoroughly the international scene and the problems of British imperialism: seek for ways of propagating among the people an understanding of the character of imperialism and of re-kindling a sense of internationalism. But this is the last thing that most professional Labour politicians want. They would like to have public figures, well-known specialists, give general vague support to the Labour Party and perhaps help to wheel the M.P.s over the white line at the next General Election. But as to conducting propaganda for socialist ideas or exerting pressure by extra-parliamentary means, this is anathema.

Mervyn Jones, in his "*Guilty Men*" and his recent exposure in *Tribune* of conditions in Cyprus, is doing what most needs to be done. But in his article he has become entangled in the inner-party-faction, toe-the-constitutional-line, keep-clear-of-proscriptions type of thinking which has done far more to corrupt socialist thought in this country in the past ten years than has Zhdanovism. He urges intellectuals to join in the Labour Party: but he dismisses the work of "getting intellectuals to sign statements, appear on platforms, hold congresses, and even join leagues and organisations" as "always a bloody silly game, and not only silly, but fraudulent too." I don't dispute that some of these means of exerting pressure may on occasion have been abused or overworked. But has Mervyn Jones, in his reaction against Zhdanovism, retreated to the *fin de siècle* view that prominent intellectuals are such *prima donnas* that they can shuffle off the duties of citizenship? Were Carlyle, Ruskin, Burne-Jones, Browning, Morris, and the various historians, bishops, and scientists who supported the Eastern Question agitation taking part in a "silly game"? And those who support the Paul Robeson petition, appear on a platform for Lukacs, sponsor the Movement for Colonial Freedom? Must all practical questions be routed through the House of Commons? How are intellectuals to assert the value of peace if they are not to sign petitions, speak at meetings, attend international congresses, or sponsor peace organisations? Indeed, I take this question to be a touchstone. The H Bomb is hunched on the shoulders of every intellectual today, and he cannot shrug it off and pass it over to the Labour Party to bring before the next Cabinet. At the time of writing a meeting of the World Council of Peace is being convened in Ceylon. I know that certain peace movements have sometimes served as propaganda forums for Communist interpretations of the Cold War. But is this the time to be so fastidious and over-scrupulous that no prominent uncommitted intellectual is willing to travel to Ceylon to make even a discordant speech? When new voices are being heard in Eastern Europe and in Russia, when Fadayev has performed the self-criticism of suicide, when Sartre and Nenni have made their contributions to these international discussions, is there no Labour M.P. who is willing to risk the displeasure of Mr. Gaitskell or of Mr. Bevan in an

attempt to enlarge the area of human understanding?

All this very much affects the position of the socialist intellectual. In my original article I suggested that "the circuit by which ideas are transformed into effective social energies has been broken, by the withdrawal of the intellectuals on one side, and the bureaucratic structure of the labour movement on the other". No-one has taken up this question of bureaucratic structure, and yet it is surely the central point? In my article I made the precious statement, for which I have been kicking myself ever since, that I no longer believe that the gap between ideas and social energies is closed "by joining anything". My point was not that socialist intellectuals ought not to join political organisations, but that the joining of organisations does not necessarily take them very far in their primary responsibilities for developing and propagating socialist ideas: and further that neither the Labour Party nor the C.P. "provide a congenial atmosphere for setting on foot a principled movement of socialist ideas". If some people choose to work within an uncongenial organisation, because of the experience and the contacts gained, that is all right: but the relevant question is not "which party shall I join?" but *WHAT ELSE* shall I do to stir up the dormant socialist traditions of this country?

The political situation today is not healthy. There may be new currents stirring among a minority of socialists, but there is no evidence that they are as yet stirring among the people. Within such a context it would be a serious mistake for socialist intellectuals to lock up all their energies in inner-Labour-Party factional fights. We must break with the closed constitutional party concepts of political agitation and try to re-establish the open traditions of the nineteenth century (at its best) where not one party but the whole people were taken as the arena: pressure groups and platforms were formed around urgent particular issues: propaganda carried on among the people as a whole: and direct unremitting pressure brought to bear on Parliament. Surely if the specialist joins the Labour Party, he must do it with the plain and outspoken reservation to himself of his right to speak on platforms, attend Congresses, and lead deputations on matters which are his concern? If the physicist is not to speak about the Bomb and the colonial expert is not to sponsor movements for justice in Kenya, who the hell is to do it? Must we leave it all to those parliamentary frumps whose sense of principle has long been dowsed among three-line whips, block-vote intrigues, vote-catching expediencies?

Above all, the socialist intellectual—whatever political ties he accepts as a citizen—must keep his eye on the main task, the formation and circulation of ideas. First, as a specialist working honestly and to his best ability within his speciality. Here there are opportunities for co-operation, collective work, fitting together work in different special fields within a coherent socialist theory which none of us have begun to discuss. Second—and not necessarily carried on by the same people, since the specialist who write good novels or make original contributions in their own fields are few—as one who communicates and propagates ideas, by means of journals, educational activities, forums and discussion groups, and though the media of political organisations, pressure-groups, and platforms and petitions. Third, through educational and cultural activities associated with the socialist movement. Here again there is a tremendous field for discussion. Our enormous

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organised labour movement makes a pitiful showing beside the actual achievements of the nineteenth century, with its Trades Halls, co-ops, educational societies, local journals, pageants and colourful demonstrations. We have no decent archives of labour history: the funds of the trade unions are scarcely touched to sponsor films, murals, drama, international exchanges, pageantry. The surviving Unity Theatres, the Workers' Musical Association, struggle with appalling financial handicaps. But there is a growing thirst among younger people for this "oblique", human approach to politics. We are fed up with waiting for the millenia which the next Labour Cabinet after the next might be forced to muddle into: socialism which is muddled into from on top by a reluctant Cabinet is not worth waiting for. People want to develop a socialist consciousness, a sense of fellowship, a satisfaction of human and cultural needs, within the present society. Surely independent of party tactical questions there is a field open here which is neither precious nor compromising? It does not require a decision of the Labour Conference to start a discussion group, a theatre group, a choir. But if our human socialist consciousness is developed in these ways, the "isolation of the intellectuals from the workers" to which Charles Taylor refers will be broken down, not in a mechanical organisational sense, but in the place where it matters: in the place of ideas, or of the arts, themselves. And if we do more of this (as undoubtedly more was done in the Thirties) it will indeed be a political act of the first importance, and will generate energies which may bring surprising political returns.

I have left myself little space to deal with the other central issue, that of Communism. While I appreciate many of Charles Taylor's points, I think his approach to the extraordinary contradictory phenomena of Communist theory, Communist-led movements, Communist Parties in and out of power in different countries, the Communist tradition, is unhistorical and a trifle academic. What am I to make of the statement that "Communism . . . would never admit that the conflict existed in its own camp as well"? If conflicts did exist then both are part of the same historical tradition. An understanding of the historical phenomena within the Communist tradition surely demands a more complex response than the one indicated in Taylor's reference to "the treatises, articles, plays, novels, poems, symphonies, all cast in the official mode, avoiding all the heresies, and appropriately didactic". Does he mean to include within this such various expressions as the books of Christopher Caudwell, Christopher Hill, Maurice Dobb, the plays of Sean O'Casey, the novels of Doris Lessing, the music of Rutland Boughton, Alan Bush or Bernard Stevens? Or only the international manifestations, such as the poetry of Mayakovsky, Eluard, Neruda and Hikmet, the painting of Picasso and Guttuso? Or just the work which has come out of Russia and Eastern Europe: for example, the music of Shostakovitch, the poems of Wazyk, or Laszlo Benjamin, or the novels of Tibor Dery, leaders of a Communist opposition to Stalinism?

The political consciousness of Charles Taylor's generation has matured during a period when the international Communist movement was dominated by an insane old man, using the full powers of the state to destroy intellectual initiative within his empire, and deified by Communist orthodoxy. If that was the end of it, if it all culminated in Zhdanov and the Rajk and Kostov trials, he

would be justified in identifying all this in an over-simplified way with Communism. But now it looks like ending very differently. And the people who will write the new conclusion will also call themselves Communists.

I think Charles Taylor will understand my point about the "fundamental humanist content" of Communism, considered as an historical tradition, if he leaves philosophical definitions aside for a moment, and turns to the events of the thirties and forties in China or Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia or Greece. What correspondence is there, for example, between Fucik's *Notes from the Gallows* and the present Czech regime: in what sense did the frame-up of Clementis "grow out of" the heroism of Fucik? Only in a most complex sense: certainly not as a direct sequence. The Czech C.P. was completely decimated by the Nazis: whole layers of leadership were annihilated. The post-1945 party was not made up of Fuciks but of a few exiles and veterans of concentration camps, together with recent converts who included time-servers and even Nazi agents trying to cover up their past record. Even this party was subject to constant pressure and dictation from the Russian generals, politicians and police. In such an historical context, is it true to say that Czech Stalinism "grew out of Communism", or is it not more true to say that Communist philosophy degenerated under these social and political pressures?

Such historical considerations surely enable us to return to our philosophical definitions with greater clarity. I entirely agree with Taylor that in examining Communism "considered as the philosophy of practice" we must examine everything, discarding much that can be termed "Leninism", and questioning much in the writings of Marx (a great deal of which has long outlasted its relevance anyway). But if we are to isolate and condemn the authoritarian and degenerate tendencies within the Communist tradition, we must use some descriptive terms: and Stalinism is not only an apposite term, it is also historically accurate, in the sense that—while (as I have argued elsewhere) Stalinist tendencies are present within the Communist tradition before Stalin—it is during the era of Stalin's dominance that they became systematised and corrupted a large body of Communist theory. And we cannot understand the world of Poland and Hungary today, nor will we understand Russia tomorrow, unless we see that the revolt against Stalinism represents at the same time the re-affirmation of values and tendencies present within the Communist tradition from its foundation. This tradition, the tradition of Morris and Mann, Fox and Caudwell, is also part of our own socialist tradition. This fact promises that we may soon heal our divisions; and socialist intellectuals in Britain should be very cautious about falling into the old emotive stock-in-trade phrases of anti-Communism, should seek to understand both the kind and the quality of conflict within contemporary Communist movements, should be sharper in their distinctions and definitions. Surely we should be doing far more than we are doing to build bridges from our side: to build intellectual and cultural links with our colleagues in Poland and China: and to promote intercourse between ourselves and intellectuals in all Communist countries, even where these can only be formal and where the Stalinist leadership is odious to us? Because if we do not do this, we not only inflame international relations and lend fuel to Stalinism, we also lend fuel to the anti-humanists—the irrationalists, the self-devouring disillusionists, the decryers of progress—in our own midst.