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# *The New Revisionism in Britain*

Since the late seventies, and particularly since the arrival in office of the Thatcher government in May 1979, a vast amount of writing has been produced on the left to account for the troubles which have beset the Labour Party and the labour movement as a whole.* The search for explanations—and for remedies—has become more intense than ever since the second Conservative victory at the polls in June 1983, not surprisingly as it was an exceptionally reactionary government which was then resoundingly confirmed in office—despite mass unemployment, the erosion of welfare and collective services, and a manifest incapacity to arrest let alone reverse Britain's economic decline. Clearly, these are very hard times for the whole left, and it is very natural—and very desirable—that such times should produce intense thinking and re-thinking about what is wrong, and what can be done about it. However, I will argue here that the tendencies which have been very strongly predominant in the writings of the left in the last few years do not offer socialist solutions to the problems now confronting it:

they constitute a 'new revisionism', to borrow John Westergaard's phrase;[1] and this new revisionism marks a very pronounced retreat from some fundamental socialist positions. Far from offering a way out of the crisis, it is another manifestation of that crisis, and contributes in no small way to the malaise, confusion, loss of confidence and even despair which have so damagingly affected the Left in recent years. Of course, the phenomenon is not confined to Britain and has assumed much more virulent and destructive forms in other countries, most notably in France, where it has constituted not a 'new revisionism', but a wholesale retreat into anti-communist hysteria and obscurantism, religious and secular. Nothing of the sort has happened in Britain, for which one must be truly grateful: at least, it has not happened in regard to any of the people whose work I am concerned with here.

I have referred to 'tendencies' and want thereby to denote a *spectrum of thought*, in which are to be found many different positions and points of emphasis, put forward by people who belong to different generations, traditions, parties and movements, and who do not necessarily agree with each other on many important issues; and it is precisely this diversity which has helped to obscure the degree to which the people concerned do work within an identifiable spectrum of thought. As I read Eric Hobsbawm, Stuart Hall, Bob Rowthorn, Beatrix Campbell, Raphael Samuel, Gareth Stedman Jones, Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Paul Hirst, Barry Hindess and others, in such journals as *Marxism Today, New Socialist, New Statesman* and a few other publications, I note great differences between them, but I also find marked similarities of approach, of disposition and concern, and, no less important, certain common repudiations.

**The Second Wave**

This new revisionism is the second such wave to occur in Britain since World War II. The first, which appeared in the fifties and reached its climax with Hugh Gaitskell's attempt to remodel the Labour Party in rightward directions, drew strength from Labour's electoral defeats of 1951, 1955 and 1959, but was not caused by them. The real cause was the determination of the Labour Party (and trade union) leaders to free the Party of its socialist commitments and to bolster the Right's predominance over the Left. Electoral defeats merely reinforced the Labour leadership's belief that such commitments were an intolerable encumbrance in ideological, political and electoral terms.

The revisionism of the present day is a very different matter, in its provenance, in its personnel and in its purpose. For most of the people concerned, Labour's new electoral defeats have only been the occasion for an anguished interrogation of the reasons for Labour's decline of support in the working class; and this interrogation is in turn part of a much larger questioning of Marxist theory and socialist proposals and practices. In this respect, the new revisionism in Britain links up with an international phenomenon nurtured from many different sources: the

* I am grateful to Robin Blackburn and Marion Kozak for some very useful comments on this article.
[1] John Westergaard, 'Class of '84', *New Socialist*, no. 15, January–February 1984.

experience of 'actually existing socialism', Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, the collapse of Maoist illusions, Cambodia and the sour aftermath of victory in Vietnam, the withering of Eurocommunist hopes, the emergence of 'new social movements' born of dissatisfaction with the limitations of traditional labour and socialist movements and parties, a growing disbelief in the capacity of the working class to be the agent of radical social change, and a consequent 'crisis of Marxism'. More specifically for Britain, there is also what has for many been the trauma of 'Thatcherism' and, even more traumatic, its ability to win elections.

Those who form part of the new revisionism are not rightwing social democrats. Some of them, like Eric Hobsbawm and Bob Rowthorn, are members of the Communist Party and have been for many years. Others, like Stuart Hall and Raphael Samuel, are foundation members of the New Left of the fifties: both of them were and remain strongly committed to radical change. Others are situated in various parts of the labour, feminist and peace movements, or in all three. Many retain affinities with one variant or another of Marxism. None of them has abjured socialism: on the contrary, they believe that they are helping its advance by the questions they are asking, the doubts they are expressing, the criticisms they are voicing, and the directions in which they are pointing.

Why then do I speak of a retreat from socialist positions? In order to answer that question, I will take in turn four closely related issues, which are of crucial significance for the labour movement, and which are also central in the spectrum of thought I am examining: the meaning and significance of 'class politics'; the question of the state; socialist strategy and the Labour Party; and some questions related to defence and foreign policy. I want to remark before I begin that the new revisionism has already provoked considerable opposition. Eric Hobsbawm's Marx Memorial Lecture of September 1978, 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?', first published in *Marxism Today*, produced a good deal of critical comment in following issues of the journal, from Communists and others.[2] Opposition to new revisionist writings has since then come from journals of the Labour Left such as *Labour Herald* and *London Labour Briefing*, from Labour Left figures such as Tony Benn and Eric Heffer, and from Trotskyist journals such as *Socialist Worker* and *Socialist Action*. But the main resistance has come from within the Communist Party, notably from a very traditionalist *Morning Star*, and also from individual party members.[3] The present article has benefited considerably from what has already been said in these various quarters about the new revisionism; but I will nevertheless advance here arguments which differ, in some instances fairly sharply, from those so far expressed.

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[2] The lecture and the comments were subsequently reprinted in E. J. Hobsbawm et al., *The Forward March of Labour Halted?* Verso/NLB, London 1981.

[3] See B. Fine, L. Harris, M. Mayo, A. Weir. E. Wilson, *Class Politics*, London 1984; and A. Weir and E. Wilson, 'The British Women's Movement', *New Left Review* 148, November–December 1984.

## Class Politics

'Class politics' has become the shorthand for much which the new revisionism most strongly repudiates: above all, it has come to stand for the insistence on the 'primacy' of organized labour in the challenge to capitalist power and the task of creating a radically different social order.

The repudiation of this notion of 'primacy' proceeds from many different objections: that the working class, in all capitalist countries, has refused to play the revolutionary role assigned to it by Marx and later Marxists, and gives no indication whatever of wishing to play that role; that, on the contrary, the aims of organized labour (which of course only constitutes a minority of the working class) have always been and remain very limited, 'economistic', sectional, corporate, and that, following from this, organized labour and the agencies purporting to represent it—trade unions and parties—cannot seriously be taken to encompass the needs and aspirations of all oppressed and exploited groups in society, and that the working class is not therefore that 'universal class', whose own liberation must signify the liberation of all such groups; that the claim to 'universality', apart from being spurious, opens wide the door to the perpetuation of domination, by virtue of the denial of the 'pluralism' which is or ought to be at the very centre of the socialist project; that the 'working class', in its traditional Marxist sense, is in any case fast disappearing in advanced capitalist countries, as a result of technological developments in late capitalism combined with the new international division of labour; and that 'new social movements', based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, ecological concerns and the struggle for peace present at least as great and as radical a challenge—in fact a greater and more radical challenge—to the existing social order than organized labour. Not all those who form part of the spectrum of thought which encompasses the new revisionism necessarily subscribe to all these propositions; but most subscribe to some of them. The time may or may not be ripe to say 'farewell to the proletariat', as André Gorz would have it,[4] but the time is certainly ripe, in the perspective of the new revisionism, to bid farewell to the 'primacy' of the working class, since that notion is archaic, misconceived and dangerous, and to replace it with a model of struggle based upon a diversity of interests, concerns and 'discourses', emanating from a multiplicity of social strata, groups and movements, with no hierarchical presumptions and pretensions, in a constantly shifting pattern of alliances.

It would be very foolish to say that there are not in all this many important insights, many very necessary corrections and critiques of traditional and complacent socialist notions, and to deny that many questions which the new revisionism raises must be taken with the utmost seriousness by anyone concerned with socialist advance. But neither should this be allowed to conceal all that is fundamentally

[4] A. Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*, London 1982, has been an influential 'revisionist' test in many countries, and seems to have had a marked impact on the current of thought I am discussing.

wrong with what the new revisionism says or implies about the role of organized labour in the challenge to capitalist power.

**Recomposition of the Working Class**

It is perfectly true that the working class has experienced in recent years an accelerated process of recomposition, with a decline of the traditional industrial sectors and a considerable further growth of the white-collar, distribution, service and technical sectors. There is nothing particularly new about such a phenomenon: in one form or another, it has been proceeding throughout the history of capitalism, most notably, in the twentieth century, by way of the truly dramatic disappearance of workers on the land as a very large component part of the working class. But in any case, the recomposition of the working class is not in the least synonymous with its disappearance as a class. On the contrary, it is perfectly reasonable to argue that there has been an increase in the number of wage-earners located in the subordinate levels of the productive process who, with their dependants, constitute the working class of advanced capitalist countries and comprise the largest part by far of their populations.

This working class is not identical with that of a hundred or fifty or even twenty-five years ago. But in terms of its location in the productive process, its very limited or non-existent power and responsibility in that process, its near-exclusive reliance on the sale of its labour power for its income, and the level of that income, it remains as much the 'working class' as its predecessors. And so does that part of the population which is made up of unemployed workers, and of others, who are not in the productive process and depend wholly or mainly on welfare payments. It is also worth noting that the 'traditional' industrial working class is a very long way from disappearing from the scene. It is, in other words, very premature to bid farewell to the working class.

Nor is there any good reason to believe that this recomposed working class is less capable of developing the commitments and 'class consciousness' which socialists have always hoped to see emerge. The ever-recurring notion that the contemporary working class has been finally integrated into capitalism, or that it has irrevocably been reconciled to it, or that it has been irreversibly splintered into divided and conflictual elements, is as unfounded today as it was yesterday.

**New Social Movements**

It is also relevant to note that the working class includes very large numbers of people who are also members of 'new social movements', or who are part of the constituency which these movements seek to reach; and their membership of the working class constitutes a major element of their social identity. To say this is not to fall into the 'class reductionism' with which the new revisionism so easily charges Marxists. It is rather an instance of what might be called 'class relationism', or the insistence that class is a critical, decisive factor in 'social being'.

The point must be taken further. It is possible for women workers, or

black workers, or gay workers, to feel in their innermost being that it is as women, or blacks, or gays, that they define themselves, and that it is as such that they experience exploitation, discrimination and oppression. But the fact that they feel this to be so, though a matter of the greatest importance, cannot be taken to imply that it is therefore an accurate representation of reality. That reality, including the exploitation, discrimination and oppression to which women, blacks and gays are subjected, is also crucially shaped by the fact that they are workers, located at a particular point of the productive process and the social structure. Upper-class women and blacks and gays may also experience discrimination and oppression: but they do so in a different way. A white woman worker experiences super-exploitation and double oppression; and a black woman worker experiences them threefold—as a black, as a woman and as a worker; and these multiple oppressions are of course combined. To oppose gender and class, to make gender or race or whatever else *the* defining criterion of 'social being', and to ignore or belittle the fact of class, is to help deepen the divisions that are present within the working class.

Sectionalism, sexism and racism do exist. Yet, it does not come amiss to recall that they have on many occasions been at least partially overcome in struggle; that workers in different occupational locations, male and female, black and white, have sometimes fought in solidarity against a common enemy; even that millions of workers, for all their divisions and divergences, have been linked, even if tenuously, by their common support of parties whose stress was not on sectional and other divisions but on class solidarity and commonness of purpose; and that there is no inherent conflict that must for ever separate worker from worker.

Nothing of this is sufficient to obliterate the daily discrimination and oppression which workers practise against workers. But it is all the same important for socialists not to erect this into an insurmountable barrier, so that the best that can ever be hoped for is the forging of transient and mutually suspicious alliances between naturally antagonistic partners. It is not only more desirable but also more reasonable to stress the need to reconcile differences, and the degree to which these, however real, are part of a given context. In *Wigan Pier Revisited*, Beatrix Campbell tells us that she began her journey 'as the kind of feminist who said "It's not men, it's the system"', but that she was convinced by her journey that 'men and masculinity, in their everyday, individual manifestations, constitute a systematic bloc of resistance to the women of their own community and class. Both individual men and the political movements men have made within the working class are culpable.'[5] No doubt 'the system' cannot explain, let alone excuse, everything. But neither will it do, at least in socialist terms, to enter this sweeping, unqualified verdict of collective gender guilt against 'men'.

The experience of the miners' strike is relevant here, or rather the experience of women in the strike. In her chapter on miners—the very epitome of 'masculinity' in her account—Beatrix Campbell writes of 'the cult of masculinity in work and play and politics' which 'thrives

[5] B. Campbell, *Wigan Pier Revisited*, London 1984, p. 5.

only in exclusive masonries of men with their secret codes which render women *immigrants in their own communities*'.[6] Yet it was at the very time that her book was published that these supposed immigrants in their own communities were organizing their magnificent support groups, and standing shoulder to shoulder with miners on the picket lines; and there seemed to be no 'systematic bloc of resistance' from the miners to what the women were doing—on the contrary. Also, and at the risk of incurring much ridicule, it is worth noting that the greatly reviled and despised trade union movement has not been altogether unmindful of the deformations by which it is diminished. Sexism, racism, discrimination, sectionalism are real enough in the labour movement, but they are commonly (not always) acknowledged as deformations, and as contrary to what are proclaimed to be the movement's values and purposes. It is of course true that acknowledgments and proclamations are not enough, and that what counts is actual practice. On this score, there is a long way to go. But it really would be to indulge in a 'labour metaphysic' to believe that a movement which has traditionally been dominated by a white male working class, bred in a competitive capitalist context, in a country with a long imperialist history, and subject to the constraints and deformations produced by that context and that history, would make one great leap into a theoretical and practical realm from which had been eliminated all the shortcomings which burden it. The point is not to slide over these shortcomings, but to struggle against them with the conviction that they are remediable, and that there is no insurmountable obstacle to the bringing of practice closer to what is proclaimed.

## A History of Struggles

Whereas these may be matters of contention, there seems at first sight to be nothing very contentious about the observation that the working class has consistently refused to play the revolutionary role assigned to it by Marx: after all, the plain historical evidence is that in no advanced capitalist country has the working class made a revolution.

On closer examination, however, the matter is perhaps not quite so plain. For the bald assertion that the working class has never played, and has never wanted to play, a revolutionary role ignores the fact that vast numbers of workers from one end of Europe to the other have often in the twentieth century displayed a militant activism that had clear revolutionary intentions or that had at least very strong revolutionary connotations—in Russia in 1917, in Eastern Europe, Austria, Germany and Italy in the years immediately following World War I, in Spain in the thirties. Nor, in less dramatic forms, has that militant activism been absent in the working class in Britain or France or the United States. Similarly, the assertion ignores the fact that the resistance to Nazi occupation throughout Europe in World War II, and notably in France, Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia—a dramatic manifestation of armed struggle on a European scale—was very largely a workers' movement impelled not only by the will to national liberation but also and no less by the will to a thoroughgoing, revolutionary social

[6] Ibid., p. 98. Emphases added.

renewal. It is also a relevant part of the account that millions of workers in advanced capitalist countries have since World War II supported parties that were pledged to bring about such a renewal. And there have been occasions in the post-war years—in Italy, France, Portugal, Greece, Britain—when large numbers of workers have displayed the same kind of militant activism that workers displayed in earlier periods. This is not to suggest that Marx's 'model' of revolution was right: it is merely to introduce a necessary corrective to an historical account which systematically underscores the intensity and scope of the class struggle in which workers have been engaged.

However, there is also a very different reason for claiming that the working class has played a rather more 'revolutionary' role in the countries of advanced capitalism than is commonly acknowledged. This is the crucial role, which has never been given the recognition due to it, played by labour in the achievement of the reforms which have marked the history of capitalism. That the 'relations of production', and for that matter the relations of life, are less oppressive for most workers than they were a hundred or even fifty years ago is in very large measure due to class struggle and pressure from below exercised upon employers and the state, and to the direct and indirect impact which the working class has had, via its representative agencies, upon the political system of these countries. This has not involved the storming of Winter Palaces, and it has certainly not produced the revolutionary transformation of capitalist societies. But it has been much more significant in its reach and results than is conveyed by such labels as 'economistic', 'corporate' and the like.

The advances which have been made have not ended exploitation and oppression, least of all of women and racial or ethnic minorities. That point needs to be made, but it should not obscure the benefits which many of these advances have brought, nor the degree to which they have served to raise expectations and to foster further demands and advances. It may be right to discard the notion of the working class as a 'universal' class; but the fact remains that organized labour, in many of the demands it makes and many of the struggles in which it is engaged, is not simply fighting for its own immediate, 'economistic' and 'corporate' ends, but for the whole working class and many beyond it; and its struggles encompass many of the aims of the 'new social movements' and could come to encompass them more fully and more effectively.[7]

The reasons for saying this have nothing to do with a sentimental idealization of the working class, or with the attribution to it of an arbitrarily privileged role, dreamt up by intellectual impresarios and rejected by the working class itself. It is rather that it is the working class, male and female, black and white, employed and unemployed, young and old, which experiences most acutely (even if unequally) the

[7] Thus Raphael Samuel notes: 'The issues raised by the [miners'] strike are not sectional issues. They have to do with energy policy, job location, industrial democracy, governmental accountability, the value attached to continuity and belonging, the work ethic, regional impoverishment, youth unemployment, local rights—and the double standards which run through our public life.' R. Samuel, 'A Plan for Disaster', *New Society*, 7 March 1985, p. 368.

contradictions, constraints and oppressions of capitalism; and that this produces in the working class demands born of felt needs. Marxists have tended to exaggerate the degree to which 'social being' must produce class and socialist consciousness in the working class. Much new revisionist writing, however, goes right to the other extreme: in denouncing the vice of economic or mechanical determinism, it succumbs to the vice of complete indeterminacy. The direction in which this leads is a subjectivism in which notions of class, structure, and society itself, cease to be regarded as proper tools of analysis. In this perspective, ideology turns into a supermarket in which diverse ideological constructs or discourses are freely available, one (or some) of which the working class (assuming there is such a thing) will choose, more or less at will, and without much (or any) reference to 'social being'. In fact, 'social being', in this perspective, is itself virtually read out of existence. Against all this, it needs to be emphasized that there is nothing 'metaphysical', 'teleological', 'mechanistic', 'economistic', 'class reductionist'—or whatever other sins Marxists are taxed with by the new revisionism—in the belief that the multiple alienations engendered in the working class by capitalism must produce pressure, challenge, struggle, conflict, and also an availability, to put it no higher, to ideas of radical change and renewal—even, dare one say it, to socialist ideas.

For after all, this is precisely what has happened in the hundred years since Marx's death, to go back no further. Not revolution, not a popular *levée en masse*, but the creation of a dense network of institutions—parties, trade unions, cooperatives, a labour and socialist press, associations and groups of every kind—which constitute a world of labour, and whose purpose is pressure, challenge, struggle and renewal. The creation of this world of labour has not been a smooth process, and its history is as much one of defeats, setbacks and betrayals as of successes; and its shortcomings, from a socialist perspective, are not difficult to see. But the process has gone on year after year and decade after decade; and it will go on so long as capitalism itself endures. Indeed, it will need to go on for a long time after. It can be diverted, divided, even temporarily arrested and crushed. Even so, it begins again, and pushes on, for the simple reason that pressure and challenge are Siamese twins of exploitation and oppression.

Given all this, the 'primacy' of organized labour in struggle arises from the fact that no other group, movement or force in capitalist society is remotely capable of mounting as effective and formidable a challenge to the existing structures of power and privilege as it is in the power of organized labour to mount. In no way is this to say that movements of women, blacks, peace activists, ecologists, gays, and others are not important, or cannot have effect, or that they ought to surrender their separate identity. Not at all. It is only to say that the principal (not the only) 'gravedigger' of capitalism remains the organized working class. Here is the necessary, indispensable 'agency of historical change'. And if, as one is constantly told is the case, the organized working class will refuse to do the job, then the job will not be done; and capitalist society will continue, generation after generation, as a conflict-ridden, growingly authoritarian and brutalized social system, poisoned by its inability to make humane and rational use of the immense resources capitalism

has itself brought into being—unless of course the world is pushed into nuclear war. Nothing has happened in the world of advanced capitalism and in the world of labour to warrant such a view of the future.

## The State

One of the subjects which figures prominently in the literature of the new revisionism is the state, a subject which Stuart Hall, in November 1984, declared to be 'central to the strategy for the renewal of the socialist project', and about which he detected 'considerable confusion among socialists'.[8] The confusion, it appears, lies in the fact that socialists profess an abhorrence of the state at one level, yet place great reliance upon it at another. This, however, does not seem to me to be a matter of confusion, but of an inevitable tension in socialist thought and practice, related to the fact that socialists do seek the subordination of the state to society, yet require the state in the struggle for reform within capitalism, and will also require the state (even if it is a different state) to defend and maintain a post-capitalist regime.

Stuart Hall finds that the use of the state for reforming purposes has meant a change in its nature: 'We still speak of the "capitalist state". But in fact we no longer behave as if it had a single, monolithic class character. The Left, despite its rhetoric, has *its* part of the state too: the welfare state which distributes benefits to the needy; serves society's needs; redistributes resources to the less well-off; provides amenities—and all on a universalistic basis, rather than on the market terms of "ability to pay".'[9] This is a remarkable misconception of the significance of the welfare measures which the state undertakes. These measures do in some degree affect the ways in which exploitation and domination are experienced, but do not destroy or threaten the system of which exploitation and domination are the essence. What the state does in this area is a response to promptings and pressures upon which it is alone empowered to act, and upon which it acts in the conviction that its response serves to strengthen, not to undermine, the system which the state seeks to defend. The fulfilment of the state's 'welfare function' does not in the least rob it of its class nature.

There is nothing strange about the fact that socialists seek to extend this welfare function of the state: that extension is a good in itself, a victory, in Marx's formulation, for the 'political economy of labour' against the political economy of capital, a way of raising and sharpening demands and expectations against capital and the state, a means of strengthening and enlarging the meaning and scope of citizen rights: in short, an intrinsic part of class struggle. So is the denunciation of the niggardliness and bureaucratic inhibitions and political resistances which the state brings to its discharge of the 'welfare function', in stark contrast to its wild profligacy when it comes to expenditure on armaments.

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[8] S. Hall, 'The State—Socialism's Old Caretaker', *Marxism Today*, November 1984, p. 24. See also, as instances of new revisionist thinking on the state, D. Held and J. Keane, 'In a Fit State', *New Socialist*, March–April 1984, and G. Hodgson, 'Overstating—the State', *Marxism Today*, June 1984.

[9] Ibid., p. 26. Emphasis in the original.

The new revisionism denounces 'statism' and 'state-administered socialism'; and there is much substance and reason in its strictures against centralism, bureaucracy, power at the top and passivity at the bottom. But it is nevertheless dangerous for socialists to refuse to see that the state is (unfortunately) of decisive importance for everything they seek to achieve. Stuart Hall is obviously right to reject 'the idea of a state which takes over everything, which absorbs all social life, all popular energies, all democratic initiatives, and which—however benevolently—governs society *in place* of the people'.[10] But he is equally right in acknowledging the role which must devolve upon the state, and in speaking of a 'dilemma' based on a 'contradictory reality' and encapsulated in the slogan 'In and Against the State'.[11] The point is crucial for any notion of socialist advance. For it is by way of state action (though by no means only through state action) that socialists can hope effectively to subdue and dissolve capitalist power—by way of a state greatly transformed in structure and personnel, but a state nevertheless.

The new revisionism consistently underestimates or even ignores the fact that the kind of change implied by the notion of socialism is a very arduous enterprise, not only because the working class may not support it, but because the dominant class is against it, and would be even if the working class were to be fervently for it. The 'dominant class' is not a figure of speech: it denotes a very real and formidable concentration of power, a close partnership of capital and the capitalist state, a combined force of class power and state power, armed with vast resources, and determined to use them to the full, in conjunction with its allies abroad, to prevent an effective challenge to its power. The new revisionism does not seem to me to take this power seriously enough: most of the relevant literature is remarkably short on the factual acknowledgment and analysis of its nature and meaning, and its implications for a realistic socialist strategy.

**Dual Power**

The power of the dominant class and its allies can be overcome: but overcoming it requires an effective state. To say this is not statist, elitist, undemocratic, male chauvinist ('the state is male'), or to be unaware of the dangers the labels point to. But the way to obviate these dangers is not to devalue and deny the role of the state, but to seek to combine state power with class power from below, in a system of 'dual power' which brings into play an array of popular forces—parties, trade unions, workers' councils, local government, women's groups, black caucuses, activists of every sort, in a democratic exercise of power and maximum self-government in the productive process and in every other sphere of life. But the state must have an important role in the whole process. Stuart Hall concludes the article from which I have already quoted by

[10] Ibid., p. 27.

[11] Ibid., p. 27. Marx, who loathed the state, nevertheless saw its necessity for the purpose of advancing social legislation. In Instructions for Delegates of the General Council of the First International to the Geneva Congress of 1866, he insisted that such advances 'can only be effected by converting *social reason* into *social force*, and, under given circumstances, there exists no other method of doing so, than through, *general laws*, enforced by the power of the state'. K. Marx, *Instructions for Delegates to the Geneva Congress*, in *The First International and After*, Penguin Books, 1974, p. 89.

referring to the 'different places from which we can all begin the reconstruction of society for which the state is the anachronistic caretaker'.[12] This is much too facile. For the state today is not an 'anachronistic caretaker': it is crucially involved in class struggle from above. Nor will it be an anachronistic caretaker for any future that need be envisaged. It will have to be more than that, not only to contain and subdue reactionary resistance to socialist advance, but to fulfil many different functions, including arbitration between the diverse and possibly conflictual forces subsumed under the rubric 'popular power'. For, on a sober view of the matter, it is certain that popular power will itself need to be regulated for a very long time after a post-capitalist society has come into being: and it is a (radically transformed) state, authentically democratic, representative and accountable, which will have to be the required regulative institution. It is upon that state and its diverse local and regional organs that will fall the task of providing the *ultimate* protection of political, civic and social rights; and it is the state that will be the *ultimate* recourse against manifestations of sexism, racism, discrimination and abuses of power which will hardly be unknown even after capitalism has been transcended.

## The Labour Party and Socialist Advance

I now turn to more immediately political issues. One of the most insistent themes of the new revisionism in Britain has been the decline of support for the Labour Party in the working class and organized labour, and the popular support which 'Thatcherism' has elicited. As I noted earlier, it was in September 1978, before the 'winter of discontent' and the Conservative victory in the election of 1979, that Eric Hobsbawm was asking whether the 'forward march of labour' had been halted, and was in effect answering in the affirmative. Similarly, it was in January 1979 that Stuart Hall was warning of the rise of an 'authoritarian populism', which he described as 'an exceptional form of the capitalist state—which, unlike classical fascism, has retained most (though not all) of the formal representative institution in place, and which at the same time has been able to construct around itself an active popular consent'.[13]

Since then, these premonitions and fears have been echoed and re-echoed in the light of the Conservative victories of 1979 and 1983, and the continued inability of the Labour Party (and the trade unions) to put up an effective opposition to 'Thatcherism'. The decline of electoral working-class support for the Labour Party since 1951 has been amply documented and is not in question. But the significance of that decline, its causes, consequences and remedies are matters whose treatment by the new revisionism is very much in question.

### 'Thatcherism'

First, however, there is 'Thatcherism' itself, and its popular appeal. 'Thatcherism' is a much more vigorous form of class struggle from

[12] Ibid., p. 29.

[13] S. Hall, 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today*, January 1979, p. 15, reprinted in M. Jacques and S. Hall, eds., *The Politics of Thatcherism*, London 1983.

above than had been waged by Conservatism since World War II, with a much stronger anti-trade union bias, a much greater determination to reaffirm managerial authority, to cut wages, to reduce the cushioning effect of welfare benefits, to 'recommodify' health, education, transport, and other collective and welfare services, to strengthen the authority and power of the state (despite all 'libertarian' protestations), and to legitimate its policies and politics by a frenzied appeal to nationalism (notwithstanding continued British subservience to the United States), not to forget anti-communism. This is a quite formidable programme, and Mrs Thatcher herself is a sufficiently ambitious, determined and blinkered politician to push it, if allowed, a long way further than she has already done. Indeed, one thing which is really new about 'Thatcherism' is the fact that Mrs Thatcher is the first British Prime Minister to convey the very strong impression that she could, in suitably fraught circumstances, very comfortably play the role of a Pinochet, or at least of an Indira Gandhi in the infamous days of the Emergency, of course in the name of democracy, freedom, law and order, the struggle against subversion and the defence of the Constitution.

This makes it all the more important to gauge accurately the popular appeal of 'Thatcherism'. Here too, Stuart Hall has been the most articulate and eloquent of the many proponents of the view that its appeal is both extensive and profound in the working class and the labour movement. Thus, 'Mrs Thatcher clearly commands the gift of translating this vision [of a free market society] into the homespun idioms of daily life better than her mentor [Sir Keith Joseph]. She has the populist touch . . . its deep penetration into the very heartland of the labour movement is there for she who runs to read . . . Paradoxically, she does raise hearts and minds an inch or two because vile, corrupt, awful as her vision of the future is, we know what it is.'[14] And more recently: 'The new Right combines new and old elements. It draws on the old lexicon of organic, patriotic Toryism, but it combines this with a virulent brand of new-liberal economics and an aggressive religion of the market. It is this novel combination which has established a kind of popular bridgehead in the community at large.'[15]

A great deal of writing on the left in recent years has been cast in similar terms, and very strongly suggests that 'Thatcherism' has won the hearts and minds of a very large part of the working class and the labour movement—in other words that a vast and catastrophic ideological and political shift to Thatcherite Conservatism has occurred in Britain.[16] There is no good evidence for this. It is relevant—though no great comfort—to note that the Conservative Party has always relied on a very substantial measure of working-class support at the polls, and has usually secured it. On this score, the Conservatives did much better

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[14] S. Hall, 'Whistling in the Void', *New Socialist*, May–June 1983, pp. 11, 12.

[15] S. Hall, 'Faith, Hope or Clarity', *Marxism Today*, January 1985, p. 16.

[16] Thus, Beatrix Campbell writes in *Wigan Pier Revisited* that Orwell's 'mobilizations of decency and patriotism are an important intervention in socialist culture. But Orwell takes commonsense as unified and simple, and it is precisely those virtues that he affirms which have always been kidnapped by the Right, *never more effectively than in the eighties, with their rugged renewal by Thatcherism*' (op. cit., p. 218). Emphases added.

under Baldwin in 1931 and 1935, when they won more than 50 per cent of the vote, than under Mrs Thatcher in 1979 and 1983. Indeed, they did better in the elections of the 1950s, and in 1970 under Edward Heath. In 1979 and 1983, the Conservatives obtained just over 40 per cent of the votes cast; and they managed to attract then barely more than 30 per cent of the total electorate. Also, a somewhat smaller percentage of voters opted for the Conservatives in 1983 than in 1979.

These are not figures which indicate any great ideological and political shift to 'Thatcherism'. Nor do opinion surveys indicate any such shift.[17] This is no argument for complacency: it is simply to note that what the Left confronts is not a surge to Conservatism and reaction but a very marked alienation of workers from the Labour Party, which is a very different matter. The point is clearly confirmed by the fact that most of the defections from the Labour Party in the 1983 General Election were to the SDP/Liberal Alliance, not to the Conservatives: those ex-Labour voters who opted for the Alliance were obviously expressing a preference for parties in declared opposition to 'Thatcherism'.

**Popular Responses**

Some further observations are in order about popular attitudes in recent years. The first is that eight and a half million voters, most of them from the working class, did vote Labour in 1983: in the light of Labour's condition at the time and the kind of electoral campaign it waged, this is a truly remarkable fact, much more so than the defections which occurred, and it is testimony to a resilience of popular support of extraordinary strength.

Secondly, there is the growth in trade-union membership, to which the authors of *Class Politics* rightly draw attention: 'From 1969 to 1979,' they note, 'trade union membership grew from 10.5 million to almost 13.5 million, after being stagnant for the previous twenty years . . . whatever the results of opinion polls, the popularity of unions as measured by membership revealed an unprecedented rise in the seventies across various sections of the population.'[18] They also note that there has since then been some decline as a result of the large increase in unemployment. Trade union membership does not betoken a political commitment to the left: but even less does it suggest a commitment to 'Thatcherism'. After all, one of the main items of the dogma is hostility to trade unionism.

Thirdly, it is necessary, in gauging the appeal of 'Thatcherism', to insist

[17] Thus James Curran notes, against Stuart Hall's contention that 'Thatcherism' has undermined 'the popular case for welfare socialism' and 'displaced reformist politics', that the recent survey, *British Social Attitudes: the 1984 Report*, shows that 'the overwhelming majority of people oppose reduced spending on health and education (85%), oppose development of a two-tier health service (64%) and favour a *dirigiste*, reformist economic policy—government job creating, construction projects (89%), import controls (72%), price controls (70%) and a programme whose first priority is combating unemployment rather than inflation (69%) . . . Thatcherite talk of incentives has not diminished the view of the great majority (72%) that the gap between high and low incomes is too great' ('Rationale for the Right', *Marxism Today*, February 1985, p. 40).

[18] *Class Politics*, op. cit., p. 25.

on the fact that, in economic terms, it has been a dismal, dreadful failure. No one, outside an admittedly large circle of sycophants, really believes that Mrs Thatcher, for all her bluster and arrogance, has done anything to remedy Britain's economic ills, or that her Government has anything serious to propose to remedy them. The only thing that has kept the Government afloat is North Sea oil: without this, it would have been in desperate trouble. Most people know that Britain is in an awful mess; and a lot of people in the working class—many more than the new revisionism seems to think—know that all 'Thatcherism' has done in six long years is to make the mess worse.

What, then, of the decline of support for the Labour Party? One might have expected that people concerned with socialist renewal would have conducted a searching probe of the reasons for that decline: in fact, what the new revisionism has had to say about its causes—and its remedies—is not very enlightening.

The decline of the Labour Party has occurred under the auspices of a Labour leadership that was almost exclusively made up of people who belonged to the Right and Centre of the Party, and who naturally pursued policies at home and abroad which were congruent with their ideological and political dispositions. It does not, somehow, seem entirely unreasonable to suggest that these policies may have had something to do with the growing popular alienation from Labour. The argument, of course, is not that the working class was clamouring for more socialism and turned away from the Labour Party because its leaders did not provide it. It is rather that the policies which these leaders pursued appeared to provide fewer and fewer reasons for workers to vote Labour. The wonder, let it be said again, is that so many workers remained faithful to Labour. However, the responsibility for decline and failure cannot simply be fastened on people like Wilson and Callaghan, heavy though their responsibility is: it must rather be attributed to a whole political orientation, namely social democracy and its will to manage a capitalist social order without ever seeking in practice to bring about a radical transformation of any of its basic features.

It would be wrong to suggest that this sorry record is not criticized, and criticized severely, in the writings of the new revisionism. On the contrary, there are many references in those writings to a variety of Labour failings and derelictions over the years; though they are much less specific than is warranted about the responsibility for the decline in Labour support which must be laid at the door of social democracy as theory and practice. More interesting, however, and instructive about the tendencies of the new revisionism are the positions which it adopts in regard to the struggles of the 'traditional' Left, in the Labour Party and out.

These struggles are of course as old as the Labour Party itself: what gave them exceptional acuity in the years following 1979 were precisely the bleak experience of the Wilson and Callaghan years, the determination of the Left in the Labour Party to push it towards more radical positions, and the inability of the Labour leaders to subdue and stifle

their critics. There would have been no question at all, twenty-five years ago, about where in these struggles stood those among the new revisionists who are old enough to have been involved in politics then: they were unequivocally on the side of the Labour Left, and only separated from it by the (very legitimate) belief that the Labour Left of that period was not nearly left enough. This cannot be said of their position in regard to present-day struggles in the Labour Party. What one finds instead is a marked detachment both from the Labour Left and from the left beyond it, even a great deal of impatience and hostility. The prevailing assumption is that the 'traditional' Left, and not least the Marxists in it, are backward-looking, 'fundamentalist', unwilling to face hard reality, authoritarian, statist, and of course sexist; and much of the new revisionist writing seems to suggest or imply that these deformations are so deeply implanted as to be virtually irremediable.

Eric Hobsbawm occupies his own particular spot in the revisionist spectrum of thought, where he is probably considered by many to be himself an eminent representative of the 'traditional' Left. Be that as it may, he has made no secret of his own impatience with those people—'Bennites' and others—who campaigned for left policies in the Labour Party after 1979. Thus, he was arguing in October 1983 that, for many people on the Left before the 1983 General Election, 'a Thatcher Government was preferable to a reformist Labour Government', and they therefore felt that 'the election was lost anyway, so it didn't much matter that potential Labour voters were puzzled and demoralized by the sight of party leaders and activists tearing each other's guts out in public for years on issues difficult to see the point of'.[19]

In a subsequent issue of *Marxism Today*, Eric Heffer vigorously challenged the assertion that many people on the Left preferred a Thatcher government to a reformist Labour one; and I think he was right to deny this.[20] More important, however, is Hobsbawm's impatient dismissal of the conflicts in the Labour Party as not only damaging but, it would appear, pretty well pointless. Consistent with this, he was writing in March 1984 that on no account must there be 'the resumption, *from any side*, of the suicidal civil war within the Labour Party'.[21]

**The Left and 'Unity'**

'Suicidal civil wars' are undoubtedly to be avoided, but the plea amounts in effect to an insistence on the need for 'unity'. But this ignores the fact that 'unity' is always on the leadership's terms, and that without hard pressure and struggle, Labour leaders cannot be expected to move very far in radical directions, even when in opposition, let alone in government. It does not seem very extreme to suggest that the point applies as much to Neil Kinnock, Roy Hattersley and their colleagues as it did to their predecessors. Hobsbawm says that 'certainly

[19] E. Hobsbawm, 'Labour's Lost Millions', *Marxism Today*, October 1983, p. 8.
[20] E. Heffer, 'Labour's Lost Millions II', *Marxism Today*, December 1983.
[21] E. Hobsbawm, 'Labour: Rump or Rebirth?', *Marxism Today*, March 1984, p. 12. Emphasis in the original.

the future lies in a Labour Party which moves to the left'.[22] Indeed, he commits himself to the very large proposition that 'like it or not, the future of socialism is through the Labour Party'.[23] But it needs to be said that, if this is to have any meaning at all, it will require a lot more pressure from the Left than he seems willing to accept. There is a contradiction here which is not resolved: but the thrust of the argument is unmistakably against what he calls 'shortsighted and sectarian radicalism'.[24]

Unfortunately, the alternative which is proposed is far removed from *any* form of radicalism. Hobsbawm says that 'Labour must, of course, recover the support of the working class as a whole', but that it must also 'become, once again, the party of *all* who want democracy, a better and fairer society, irrespective of the class pigeon-hole into which pollsters and market researchers put them: in short, to use the old Labour phrase, "all workers by hand and brain"—and that includes not only the vast majority of Britons who earn wages and salaries.'[25] But the Labour Party has never had the support of the working class 'as a whole'. Nor has it ever been the party of 'all workers by hand and brain'. If it had been, its record at election time would have been very different. Yet, Hobsbawm wants Labour to go even beyond this 'vast majority of Britons who earn wages and salaries', and appeal (presumably) to large parts of the solid bourgeoisie.

The trouble with this kind of appeal is that it is always accompanied by a sharp *dilution* of radical commitments, and an equally strong antagonism towards the Left, which naturally opposes such dilution. In his famous allusion to the possibility that an electoral arrangement with the SDP/Liberal Alliance might have to be considered at the next election, Hobsbawm says that 'some way of uniting the majority of British people which is opposed to Toryism must be found'.[26] But the kind of policies to which the argument is pointing are least likely to achieve any such aim. For they demand a constant search for 'formulas' capable of bringing together people who are deeply divided on fundamental issues—a perfect recipe for flabbiness and indecision in opposition, and ineffectiveness and failure in government. The same must be said of the notion put forward by Martin Jacques and Stuart Hall in their Introduction to the *Politics of Thatcherism* collection, that what is required by the labour movement is 'the construction of the broadest set of alliances against Thatcherism, involving, in the initial instance, possibly *quite modest objectives*'.[27] Whatever may be said for 'the broadest set of alliances', there is nothing to be said for the 'quite modest objectives' proposed here. For nothing could be more certain to disable and disarm the labour movement, and nullify, precisely, its ability to be

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[22] Ibid., p. 8.
[23] Ibid., p. 8.
[24] Ibid., p. 11.
[25] 'Labour's Lost Millions', p. 9. He also writes: 'There is nothing opportunistic about the belief that a nuclear arms race is the way to disaster, and in saying so Labour is already appealing for support across class lines. It is not opportunistic to believe that we can and should appeal to *all* women and *all* young people . . .'
[26] Ibid. Emphases in the original.
[27] *The Politics of Thatcherism*, op. cit., p. 16. Emphases added.

the organizing force of a set of alliances which would encompass that 'vast majority of Britons who earn wages and salaries'. Only a radical programme, not at all modest in its objectives, fiercely believed in and unequivocally advocated by those who propound it, can be the cement of such an alliance, and might even bring to its support segments of the bourgeoisie whom Hobsbawm wants to enlist.

Eric Hobsbawm has been a steadfast man of the Left for fifty years. He is not only one of its most gifted and distinguished intellectuals, but a man of great honesty and decency, whose responses to the controversies which he has generated have been a model of sobriety and moderation. What lies behind his whole argument is an entirely honourable set of fears. In an article published in January 1983, he wrote: 'The danger of a populist, radical Right moving even further to the right is patent. That danger is particularly great because the Left is today divided and demoralized and above all because vast masses of the British, or anyway the English, have lost hope and confidence in the political processes and in the politicians: any politicians.'[28] The danger is indeed real enough. But the ways in which he proposes to meet that danger seem to me likely to aggravate it.

**An Anti-Left Spectrum**

Others in the spectrum of thought I am discussing occupy rather different positions. But their hostility to left strivings is also very notable. Thus, Raphael Samuel published on the eve of the 1984 Labour Party Annual Conference an article entitled 'Benn Past and Benn Present' which has such passages as the following: 'In Mr Benn's imaginative universe . . . the annual Conference takes on the character of a living, sentient being, a collective subject with a mind and personality of its own . . . To the anguished question of Labour supporters, "What went wrong?", Bennism returned the dazzlingly simple answer: "Conference decisions were never carried out" . . . The fulsome tributes to the grassroots, as also, it may be, to the trade unions, are those which are the privilege, and the duty, of one who stands apart . . . *it is difficult not to be reminded of those classic tones of condescension which patricians have ever been wont to adopt when proclaiming their love of the plebs*.' Again, 'It is Mr Benn's tragedy that he espoused the cause of socialism at the very moment when, as it now appears, in Britain as in the rest of Europe (East as well as West) it was ceasing to be a working-class faith. The refusal to acknowledge this novel phenomenon is surely the source of strain in his rhetoric.'[29] It would be impossible to have any sense, in reading Raphael Samuel's article, that no one in the Labour Party who has ever held Cabinet office has been as explicit, specific and thorough as Benn (Nye Bevan not excluded) in the denunciation of the economic, social and political power structure in Britain. This hardly places him beyond criticism. But denigration is something else, and is best left to the enemies of socialism.

Thus also was Stuart Hall writing in the spring of 1983, after the miners

[28] E. Hobsbawm, 'Falklands Fallout', *Marxism Today*, January 1983, p. 19.
[29] R. Samuel, 'Benn Past and Benn Present', *New Statesman*, 28 September 1984. Emphases added.

had voted against strike action, that 'to imagine that people will sacrifice their livelihoods on the un-evidenced assurances of their leadership is to misread the relationship between leaders and troops and to misunderstand the rationality of working-class action . . . The miners were offered three reasons for voting for a strike: in memory of those who had built the union; for their families; and "as men", who have a duty to stand up and fight. Glowing sentiments. And yet, in their backward trajectory, their familial and masculinist assumptions, those words fall on my ears as archaic. The cause is correct. The language is a dying one.'[30] Less than a year after this was written, the miners did go on strike, and stayed out for a year, and Stuart Hall was able to write that 'undoubtedly the miners' strike has released enormous confidence and energy on the Left'.[31]

For her part, Beatrix Campbell, in the book from which I have already quoted, saw the miners' rejection of industrial action in 1982 as a confirmation of 'the suspicion that gone are the old ways of fighting the class war'.[32] It was not a suspicion shared by the miners themselves, nor certainly by the Thatcher Government.

At the end of 1984, Beatrix Campbell was also very angry with Tariq Ali for having dared to suggest, in a book which she found 'boring' (the book was his interviews with Ken Livingstone, *Who's Afraid of Margaret Thatcher?*) that, in Tariq Ali's words, 'a serious socialist project in Britain requires a fusion of the theoretical reach and grasp of a wide layer of Marxists [he means like himself, she helpfully interjects at this point] . . . with the practical skills, abilities and courage of leaders able to communicate with millions such as Benn, Scargill and Livingstone'.[33] She comments on this as follows: 'The Three Musketeers. What this amounts to is tawdry far left elitism, dressed up as a kind of new popular intervention in politics . . . Tariq's injunction is really the rehabilitation of an old formula for political organization . . . It's a pyramid of course, vanguards always are, and at the top there are very, very few people.' Well might Tariq Ali describe this (and much else in the same vein) as a demagogic caricature of the argument he was putting forward: 'The attack on fundamentalist elitism is demagogic because even the most radical libertarian has to try to be more enlightened, active and organized than the mass of citizens. The only way to avoid this charge would be to sink into complete passivity and agnosticism.'[34]

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[30] 'Whistling in the Void', op. cit., p. 12.

[31] 'Faith, Hope or Clarity', op. cit., p. 18.

[32] *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op. cit., p. 114. Her comments on the miners' strike suggest that she saw it mainly as a struggle between the 'hard Right' and the 'hard Left', and it is the latter for which she reserved her most vitriolic remarks. However, nothing that she had to say, she assured her readers, was 'an argument against *struggle*, it is simply an argument against amnesia and trotspeak'. (B. Campbell, 'Politics Old and New', *New Statesman*, 8 March 1985, p. 24.) She also reports, with obvious approval, women who supported the strike as feeling alienated from 'men, behaving like men do, angry, brutal, useless. *One side's as bad as the other*' (ibid). Her own attacks on the left demonstrate that verbal brutality, at least, is not a monopoly of men. Emphases added.

[33] B. Campbell, 'Politics, Pyramids—and People', *Marxism Today*, December 1984, p. 25. See T. Ali and K. Livingstone, *Who's Afraid of Margaret Thatcher?*, Verso, London 1984.

[34] T. Ali, 'Politics and Pyramids', *Marxism Today*, January 1985, p. 40.

In her article, Beatrix Campbell also says that 'this notion of the vanguard goes . . . against the very thing that is interesting about the GLC which is that it gave resources to poor bits of popular politics that were already engaged in changing the material conditions in which people lived.'[35] What this typically overlooks is that it was an *organization*, involving *leaders*, who willy nilly constituted a *'vanguard'*, that was able to give resources to the people in question. It is important to understand the basis from which the kind of thinking noted here proceeds. It proceeds from a set of negative identifications: class politics is identified with a 'reductionist' dissolution of diversity, with a narrow 'economism', often with male chauvinism. Organization is identified with bureaucracy, leadership with elitism, fundamental commitments with 'fundamentalist' myopia. In other words, real vices and deformations, which are a part of the story, are often treated as if they were the whole of it, and pretty well ineradicable. This is profoundly destructive. In many cases, such negative identifications have led to the complete rejection of socialist politics. In the case of the new revisionism, it has led to other things—such as a narrow grassroots localism, akin to what Raymond Williams has called 'militant particularism', and intensely suspicious of anything beyond it. This is the obverse of the centralist bias which has often affected the Left. But grassroots localism is also a deformation, more attractive than centralism, but incapable of offering an effective challenge to a highly concentrated system of power. There have in recent years been remarkable initiatives and advances at municipal and community level; and these are of course to be welcomed and supported. But 'socialism in one locality' is no substitute for the national politics in which socialists are compelled to intervene.

## The International Dimension

All this discussion is much too parochial: but the fact is that the writings I have been concerned with make virtually no reference to the question of Britain in the world. There is here a vast zone of near silence. This is all the more remarkable in that the question has the most direct bearing upon many of the political issues which do preoccupy the people in the spectrum of thought under consideration.

It may be assumed that all such people do want to see some fundamental reorientations in British foreign and defence policies, including unilateral nuclear disarmament for Britain and the closing down of American nuclear bases on British territory. They want, it may also be assumed, an end to British support for the global anti-revolutionary enterprise in which the United States has been engaged in the name of anti-communism since 1945; and they certainly oppose American intervention in Central America. Many—perhaps most—would also support a British withdrawal from NATO.

As for attitudes to the Soviet Union, most of the people concerned no doubt take a sharply critical view of many Soviet policies and actions at home and abroad, and have the strong conviction, on many grounds, that the Soviet Union and other Soviet-type countries are a long way

[35] Campbell, p. 25.

removed from anything that could properly be called socialist societies. There are critics of the new revisionism who find this utterly abhorrent and an intolerable deviation from what they take to be the path of socialist rectitude. Other critics of the new revisionism, on the other hand, including this one, do not take this view, yet are also thankful, as I noted at the beginning of this article, that there has been nothing on the Left in Britain like the virulent anti-communism, *and* the support for American defence and foreign policies, which have been so notable among ex-Maoists, ex-Stalinists and other ex-leftists in France and elsewhere.

However, the positions and commitments which the new revisionism does have in regard to defence and foreign policy have large implications which it has never seriously confronted—indeed, which it has never confronted at all. Two of these implications in particular must be mentioned here. First, there is the fact that the Labour leaders also have their commitments and positions. They oppose certain items of American interventionism, for instance in Nicaragua; and they are also formally against—but who knows how firmly?—nuclear bases in Britain, Cruise and Pershing missiles, Polaris, Trident and Star Wars. But they also remain very firmly committed—here there is no doubt at all—to the American alliance and to membership of NATO. This combination is a perfect recipe for incoherence and vacillation, as was so well demonstrated in the 1983 General Election campaign. The problem has not been resolved. But if it is to be resolved in leftward directions, which is what the new revisionism must be presumed to want, there will have to be a great deal of prodding and pushing, and much of it will have to come from the 'traditional' Left, in the Labour Party and out. On this score as on so many others, the new revisionism should see the 'traditional' Left as indispensable to its own purposes, rather than as an alien and suspect force; and here too, unpopular though it may be to say so, not much will really move until the organized working class decides that it should. This is not to devalue the work of peace activists: it is only to say that organized labour will be required if there is to be real movement.

The second point is closely related to the first. This is that any significant reorientation in defence and foreign policies—and unilateral disarmament is certainly that—would very definitely be taken to be 'revolutionary' by a vast array of conservative forces at home and abroad. Indeed, any serious attempt by a hypothetical Labour government to put into practice such policies as the closing down of American nuclear bases and the giving up of the British nuclear arsenal would certainly provoke frenzied opposition from many quarters in Britain, from the United States, and from other members of NATO.

This brings into focus the same considerations that were advanced earlier in relation to socialist policies designed to erode and dissolve the existing structures of power. The opposition to the radical reorientation, by a government of the left, of existing defence and foreign policies can only be successfully met by a vast mobilization of many forces drawn from many sources: at their core, there would have to be the force of organized labour, men and women workers, white workers and black

workers, young workers and older workers. And that mobilization would, here too, require the combination of state power with class power, organization and leadership with local initiative and grassroots spontaneity. In other words, the struggle, both for socialism and for peace, requires a system of popular alliances: it is only the organized working class which can form the basis of that system.

One of the most commonly heard slogans on the Left these days is 'Pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will'. This is always attributed to Gramsci, but was actually borrowed by him from Romain Rolland, who belonged to a very different political tradition. It is readily taken on the Left to enshrine the only wisdom appropriate to the present epoch: it is in fact an exceedingly bad slogan for socialists. For it tells us that reason dictates the conviction that nothing is likely to work out as it should, that defeat is much more likely than success, that the hope of creating a social order free from exploitation and domination is probably illusory; but that we must nevertheless strive towards it, against all odds, in a mood of resolute despair. It is a 'noble' slogan, born of romantic pathos, but without even the merit of plausibility: for there is not likely to be much striving if intelligence tells us that the enterprise is vain, hopeless, doomed. Yet, it is the mood in which much of the thinking of the new revisionism is cast.

Twenty-five years ago, when this Review came into being, there was no thought among those who started it that they were standing on an historical escalator that was inevitably carrying them to the promised land of an easy-to-realize socialism. But neither was there any sense that the socialist enterprise, the project of creating a cooperative, democratic, egalitarian society, was illusory. Nor, for all the hard knocks which the socialist cause has taken in the last twenty-five years, is there any good reason to believe this now.