

**Maurice Brinton**

**The malaise on the left**

Forget for a moment the scare campaigns of the recent elections: Scanlon and Jones presented by the yellow press as proselytisers of red revolution, Mr. Wilson in the garb of a latter-day Kerensky opening the gates to Bolshevism or worse, bank clerks freezing (a la Portuguese) the funds of fleeting fascists, the great fear of the bourgeoisie about a "mafia of fanatical socialists" in control of the commanding heights... of the National Executive of the Labour Party!

The reality is less lurid - and less encouraging. What we see around us is a confident and aggressive movement, increasingly aware of the fact that real power does not lie in Parliament, but profoundly divided as to objectives, strategy and tactics and completely at sea as to values and priorities. So divergent are its component strands that one has to ask, quite bluntly, whether one can legitimately speak of a movement. Among thinking socialists there is a deep malaise.

The purpose of this article is to explore the roots of this malaise, and to show that they lie in the transformations of class society itself. Over the last few decades - and in many different areas - established society has itself brought about the number of the things that the revolutionaries of yesterday were demanding. This has happened in relation to economic attitudes, in relation to certain forms of social organisation, and in relation to various aspects of the personal and sexual revolutions. When this adaptation in fact benefits established society, it is legitimate to refer to it as "recuperation". This article seeks to start a discussion on the limits of recuperation.

Recuperation, of course, is nothing new. What is perhaps new is the extent to which most "revolutionaries" (whether they are demanding "more nationalisation", more "self-management" or "more personal freedom" are unaware of the system's ability to absorb - and in the long run benefit from - these forms of "dissent". Class society has a tremendous resilience, a great capacity to cope with "subversion" to make icons of its iconoclasts, to draw sustenance from those who would throttle it. Revolutionaries must constantly be aware of this strength, otherwise they will fail to see what is happening around them. If certain sacred cows (or certain previous formulations, now found to be inadequate) have to be sacrificed, we'd rather do the job ourselves.

## **Recuperation of economic demands**

Keynesian economic policies, once considered radical threats to bourgeois Society, are today widely accepted as essential to the functioning of modern capitalism. The demands for nationalisation of the mines or railways, for national health insurance, for unemployment benefit and for state pensions have been totally recuperated. Despite occasional nostalgic (and largely irrelevant) glances into the past, no Conservative politician, seeking to retain a shred of credibility, would today advocate the return of the mines or of the railways to private ownership - or the dismantling of the essential structure of the "welfare" state. All socialists would agree, thus far.

But there is then a parting of the ways. We would claim that the centralisation of all the means of production in the hands of

the state - the most "radical" demand of the Communist Manifesto - has been achieved in many parts of the world without any corresponding enhancement in the areas of human freedom. In fact an exploiting society, divided into order-givers and order-takers, functions far better on this type of economic base, which eliminates many of the irrationalities of laissez-faire capitalism. Whatever the human aspirations of their rank and file, the ideologies and programs of Social Democratic, Communist, Trotskyist or Maoist groups in the West provide the most articulate demands for this kind of social organisation. These groups are the midwives of State Capitalism. They may differ as to tempo and as to tactics. They may argue about what they consider to be (for others) the acceptable or unacceptable costs. But their fundamental objective is the same - and is moreover in keeping with the deepest requirements of Capital itself. Pace the ghosts of Hayek and of Schumpeter, pace Enoch Powell and Keith Joseph, the division of society into rulers and ruled will not be abolished by the abolition of the "free market" or, for that matter, by anything that Messrs. Wilson or Gollan (or the "theoreticians" of any of the Marxist sects) may have in mind.

Moreover all over the Third World (from Sékou Touré's Guinea to North Vietnam, from Iraq to Zanzibar) "Marxist-Leninist" ideas are today influencing the birth and molding the economic life of many developing countries. All are ruthlessly exploitative societies, geared to the rapid development of the productive forces. Today this is only possible on the basis of intense primary accumulation, carried out on the backs of the

peasantry. Here again erstwhile revolutionary ideas are becoming vehicles for new forms of enslavement.

To paraphrase Marx, it is not what men think they are doing that matters. What matters is the objective result of their beliefs and actions. Class society can well recuperate the economic demands of the traditional left. It is not of fundamental importance, in this respect, whether various ruling classes are fully aware of what is happening to them. They clearly differ from one another in the degree of insight they have achieved into their own long-term, historical interests. The more far-sighted among them now accept the centralisation of the means of production in the hands of the State as the essential precondition for the growth of the productive forces. For most Marxist socialists (and for the bourgeoisie) this growth is the fundamental issue. This is what unites them. This is where the bourgeois vision and the Marxist vision coalesce. For both of them economic growth is what politics (and ultimately what life itself) is all about. There are few other dimensions to their thinking. For both of them the future is mainly about "more of the same". And the rest? The rest is for "after the revolution"<sup>2</sup>. At best, it will look after itself. At worst, if one speaks to a traditional Marxist about such issues as women's liberation, ecology, the "counter-culture"<sup>2</sup>, etc. one is denounced as a "diversionist"<sup>2</sup> in tones showing how deeply the work ethic, patriarchal attitudes and value system of the existing society have permeated their thinking.

## Recuperation of institutional forms

Sections of the left have fortunately gone far beyond the demands for nationalisation, planning, etc. In the wake of the Russian Revolution small groups of "left" communists clearly foresaw the course of events which this type of "socialism" would lead to. Slandered by Lenin, denounced by the "orthodox" communists, they warned of what lay ahead: the rule of the party would soon result in the emergence of a new ruling class, based not on the private ownership of the means of production but on a monopoly of decisional authority in all areas of economic, political and social life. To the hegemony of the Party and to the omniscience of its Central Committee the left communist counter-posed the knowledge and power of an enlightened and autonomous working class. They posited the institutional form this power would take: the Workers' Councils. This was no genial blueprint for a new society sucked out of the thumb of a Gorter or a Pannekoek. From the Paris Commune to the Russian Revolution of 1917 the "council" form of organisation had been the living historical product of the class struggle itself. The warnings of these earlier revolutionaries have been fully justified.

But their vision remains limited. Despite Pannekoek's interests in science and philosophy, Ruhle's interest in pedagogy, and Korsch's stress on the need for a deep-going cultural critique, most of the writings of the left communists centered on problems of work and of production and distribution. They lived in a very different era from our own, and had little of

significance to say about what have become very important areas of social life: bureaucratization, alienation in consumption and leisure, authoritarian conditioning, the "youth revolt," women's liberation, etc. Even some of their institutional proposals have been partly overtaken by events.

The recuperation of the demand for working class power at the point of production and for a society based on Workers' Councils has, for instance, taken on a particularly sinister form. Confronted with the bureaucratic monstrosity of Stalinist and post-Stalinist Russia, yet wishing to retain some credibility among their working class supporters, various strands of Bolshevism have sought posthumously to rehabilitate the concept of "workers' control". Although "workers' control" was only referred to once in the documents of the first four congresses of the Communist International it has recently become one of the Top Ten Slogans. Between 1917 and 1921 all attempts by the working class to assert real power over production - or to transcend the narrow role allocated to it by the Party - were smashed by the Bolsheviks, after first having been denounced as anarchist or anarcho-syndicalist deviations. Today workers' control is presented as a sort of sugar coating to the pill of nationalisation of every Trotskyist or Leninist micro-bureaucrat on the make. Those who strangled the viable infant are now hawking the corpse around. The Institute for Workers' Control even runs annual conferences, addressed and dominated by trade union officials appointed for life. Those who are not prepared to allow workers to control their own organisations here and now serenade sundry simple-tons with

fanciful tunes as to their fate in the future. Recuperation here is taking place amid incredible confusion.

For a long time the advocacy of genuine workers control (or, as we prefer to call it, workers' self management) remained confined to small groups of revolutionaries swimming against the great bureaucratic tide. Following the French events of May 1968 the demand took on a new reality and a new coherence. People began to see self-management as the dominant theme (and Workers' Councils as the institutional form) of a new society in which bureaucracy would be eliminated, and in which ordinary people would at last achieve genuine power over many aspects of their everyday life. But this again was to ignore the system's capacity for integrating dissent and harnessing it to its own advantage.

Can the demand for self-management be geared to the requirements of class society itself? An honest answer would be "yes, in some respects"☹. Yes, providing those operating the self-management still accepted the values of the system. Yes, if it remained strictly localised. Yes, provided it was eviscerated of all political content Car assembly plants seeking to obtain the participation of the workers have been operating for some time in the Volvo and Saab factories in Sweden. Under the "with it"☹ guise of enriching the workers' job, employers have continued to enrich themselves. Groups of workers are allowed to manage their own alienation. The powers- that-be seek to resuscitate the anemic institutions of existing society (increasingly abandoned by those expected to make them function) with transfusions of "participation"☹. No wonder the

slogan has been taken up by everyone from Gaullist deputies to our own Liberals.

Revolutionaries are in some measures to blame for this confusion of form and content. They have insufficiently warned against the dangers inherent in any attempts at self-management with capitalism. And, in relation to the future, they have insufficiently stressed the limitations of the demand. Self-management and Workers' Councils are means to liberation. They are not liberation itself. Many revolutionaries have, moreover, tended to underestimate the complex problems of society as a whole. These have to be considered in addition to the problems of particular groups of workers. Our vision has never been "the railways to the railway men, the dust to the dustmen". We are not for self-managed insurance empires, for self-managed advertising companies, for the self-managed production of nuclear weapons.

This is not to say that self-management will not be the dominant theme, and the council probably the institutional form of any kind of socialist society. But they are no more than that. Into those particular bottles many wines can be poured. In contemporary society self-management could very well develop on a reformist, racist, nationalistic or militaristic basis. The historical precedents are here. Many Workers' Councils in Germany - in December 1918, and again later on - voted to surrender power to parliamentary institutions. Between 1930 and 1945 the vast majority of the British and German people identified with their respective rulers and mobilised themselves (or allowed themselves to be mobilised) in the defence of

interests that were not their own. Israeli self-managed kibbutzim are vehicles for the dissemination of Zionist ideology and for implementing (anti-Arab) discrimination, i.e. anti-socialist policies. In Northern Ireland, amid an "unparalleled explosion of self-management"<sup>2</sup>, the self-activity of a civilian population recently brought down a government. . . in the name of sectarian and mystified objectives. The lessons are clear. Self-management, divorced from socialist politics, is meaningless.

## **Recuperation of "proto-Marxist"<sup>2</sup> demands**

Confronted with the fact that established society has successfully co-opted both the economic objectives and some of the institutional prescriptions of those who wanted to challenge it, radicals have responded in a number of ways.

One response has been to delve deeper into Marx. The 'communist project' is redefined in proto-Marxist terms. We now have Marx a la carte. What is stressed is not what was the historical reality of Marxism (even in Marx's day) but a vision which, although valid, seldom went beyond the realm of rhetoric. The Marx of "the proletarians have no Fatherland"<sup>2</sup> replaces the Marx of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71 who supported first Bismarck's armies, then - after Sedan - the forces of the Second Empire. The Marx who denounced the slogan "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work"<sup>2</sup> (arguing instead for "the abolition of the wages system"<sup>2</sup>) replaces the more prosaic Marx, manoeuvring among the Lucrafts and the Maltman Barrys in the counsels of the First International. The

Marx who thundered that "the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself" erases the pathetic figure of the Marx of 1872, cooking the last congress of the International (the only one he attended in person), inventing non-existing delegations, shifting the venues of future meetings to harass the supporters of the equally authoritarian Bakunin.

But are even these proto-Marxist prescriptions adequate? Is the "abolition of frontiers" any kind of guarantee as to the type of regime that will hold sway over the new, frontier-less expanse? Is the vision of an exploitative society, fusing the techniques of domination of both East and West, just a nightmare dreamed up by the writers of science fiction? Is the abolition of the wage labour any guarantee against exploitation and alienation? Were there not exploitative societies long before wage labour appeared on the historical scene? Wage labour underpins and reinforces hierarchies of power. Its abolition does not necessarily abolish such hierarchies. Class society might even recuperate demands of this kind.

### **Recuperation of the "personal revolution"**

Another response of those confronted with the tremendous recuperative powers of established society has been a tendency to seek individual emancipation, to create in the "here and now" microcosms of the alternative society. Some advocates of this viewpoint see the growth of social freedom as the by-product of the addition of one "free" individual to another, rather like workers going to Ruskin College to become "emancipated one by one". This type of revolt, as long as it is

conceived in purely individual terms, can readily be recuperated by established society. Individual revolt, whether in clothing or in hair styles, whether in food preferences or in musical tastes, whether in sexual mores or in philosophical attitudes, readily becomes a commodity to be frenetically exploited in the interests of Capital itself. (The important book 'The Failure of the Sexual Revolution' by George Frankl, deals with this theme.)

## **The limits of recuperation**

In the Irrational in Politics we wrote that exploiting society would not be able to tolerate "the mass development of critical, demystified, self-reliant; sexually emancipated, autonomous, non-alienated persons, conscious of what they want and prepared to struggle for it". We still hold this idea to be basically correct. Its core, that, one cannot conceive of any genuinely liberatory movement without genuinely liberated individuals seems irrefutable. But our formulation was inadequate. We should have spoken of individuals prepared collectively to struggle for what they wanted. And we should have spoken more about the objectives of the struggle. We should have described more clearly what the vision was, in our eyes at least. The socialist transformation of society is not an automatic process, or a reflex activity. It requires a sense of direction. There may be many roads to the Promised Land but it can surely only help if people know where they are going.

Let us take it for granted that meaningful activity needs to be collective, that social transformation needs emancipated

individuals, and that the institutional framework of any new society will probably be based, in part at least, on those forms which the struggle itself has repeatedly thrown up at its moments of deepest insight and creativity. What we now need to think about - and to discuss widely throughout the libertarian left - is the political content of an activity that consciously seeks both to avoid recuperation and to be relevant to the conditions of today.

Are certain yardsticks necessary to define such an activity? I personally think the answer is "yes" - with the proviso that the definition must be seen as an ongoing process. Should revolutionaries who share common objectives group together, first to discuss their objectives and then to fight for them? Again I think the answer is "yes"👉. "Political inexistentialism" is only relevant if one thinks there is some divine guidance ensuring that every struggle helps move society in a socialist direction.

It is only if libertarians speak openly about these questions that they will be able to present a credible alternative to the authoritarian left. If socialism is the creation of forms of living that will enable all - free from external constraints or internalised inhibitions - to rise to their full stature, to fulfill themselves as human beings, to enjoy themselves, to relate to one another without treading on anybody (and this is as good a definition of socialism as any other) - we should say so loud and clear. And we should not be afraid of criticising any activities - however "self-managed"👉 - that lead in an opposite direction. Socialism, after all, is about a specific way of socialising. In this

discussion we must not forget the economic prerequisites of what we seek. Nor must we confuse them with the objective itself. Finally we must not underestimate the forces we are up against, including the recuperative powers of established society. An ongoing reassessment of the degree to which one's former goals have been recuperated is the most effective antidote to the malaise on the left, and the only possible prescription for remaining a revolutionary.