

The literary sources of the British New Left make a conveniently modest subject for the historian. Britain was never exactly pre-eminent in this field: the New Left from the start was international, its German roots spreading rapidly outwards into France and America. Its chief flowering was in the United States in the 1960s; its noisiest and most hectic existence was lived out in the great mass-universities of North America and the European Continent, and rarely in the shy, selective backwaters of British academic life.

Modest, too, in the time-scale. As an active and visible movement the New Left lasted internationally for less than a decade, from the California of 1964 to the withdrawal of American troops from Indo-China in 1971–2. In the ancient traditions of Marxism, a faith now well over a century old, this is little more than a bubble on the ocean surface. One might even argue, in a reasonable if hardfaced sort of way, that in real terms the New Left never amounted to much, and that the Marxists who really matter are those who govern one-third of the human race and want to govern the rest. In the British context, that means those who take themselves to where power is: not to universities but to Parliament, the party-machines or the rich and vital power-points of the trade-union movement.

Such arguments should fail to daunt the literary historian precisely because they are true. A subject is all the more inviting for being delimited, and the literary sources of the New Left, in any case, make a strong appeal to the historical temper. They are themselves, after all, historiographical documents. Few political movements in recent times have been so deeply obsessed with the past as this. Mass political parties usually have very short memories: it is even difficult in a general election to maintain the interest of voters in the events of the Parliament just dissolved. But then the temper of pop-

ular politics is very unacademic; and the New Left was always strenuously academic, firmly chained in its arguments to an established scripture. Its sacred writings were the early papers of Marx, notably the Paris manuscripts of 1844, with their modern commentaries.<sup>1</sup> From the start it was committed to a traditional nineteenth-century dogma that 'capitalism' must inevitably give way to 'socialism' – a view which, since the 1950s, has been considered even in the Soviet Union to have been outmoded by events. It accepted unquestioningly, and from the start, the spectrum-view of political opinion as a struggle between Left and Right. In Britain its literary texts, like Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (1958), were essentially retrospective studies of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. Any university teacher active in the Sixties will recall how colleagues and students of that persuasion commonly chose literary and historical studies within the period stretching from the 1830s to the First World War. The cult-figures, at least among native Britons, were such men as Carlyle, William Morris, Ruskin and Keir Hardie. This was always a neo-Victorian enthusiasm, and it is no wonder if it revived a fashion for beards.

What is more, the New Left was from the start intensely conscious of its own history. When I was in Berkeley in the late autumn of 1964, at the University of California, demonstrators often handed out leaflets that included long chronologies listing the day-by-day evolution of protest over the recent months: how the university had forbidden the sale of political literature on one day, how the partisans of free speech had reacted on the next, and how the academic authorities had responded to that. . . . The self-importance of the New Left, always considerable, was from the start historically self-conscious. It behaved as if future historians, and historians not far in the future at that, must one day raise their pens and write about it. Its auto-intoxication was archival. He who controls the past controls the future, as the rulers of Orwell's 1984 believed. The New Left went further than that: it sought to control its own history as it went. But it is itself, by now, a fact of the past, and he who controls its history may hope to control it.



Let me now attempt a brief backward view of the immediate literary sources of the British New Left.

The *New Left Review* began to appear in January 1960, incorporating the Oxford journal *Universities and Left Review* (1957–9) and the *New Reasoner* (1957–9), both of them dissident Communist journals emerging from the break-up of official communism in the West after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in October 1956, and the rise of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1957–8. The editor of the *New Left Review* was Stuart Hall, a young Oxford graduate, and its first editorial board included Doris Lessing, Alasdair MacIntyre, Ralph Miliband, Edward Thompson and Raymond Williams – all academics, or academics-to-be, apart from Mrs Lessing the novelist. In its first editorial it struck a note of utopian socialism hostile to both Western consumerism and Soviet brutality, and Victorian sources were promptly invoked: ‘The humanist strength of socialism . . . must be developed in cultural and social terms, as well as economic and political’; the editor beginning and ending his manifesto with sonorous quotations from William Morris, exclaiming ‘How close Morris came to the bone!’ In the same year the series ‘New Left Books’ was launched, its first volume being *Out of Apathy* (1960) by Edward Thompson and others.

The literary foundations of the New Left in Britain lie further back than 1960, but not much. A little spate of academic books of the Fifties herald the approach: Hoggart and Williams in 1957–8; studies of the English Civil War by Christopher Hill, who left the Communist Party over Hungary and who, as an historian, escaped the usual socialist obsession with the Victorians; and Edward Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class*, a substantial study that did not appear until 1963. All this is more or less academic historiography, though *The Uses of Literacy*, which is several books worked into one, also smacks of autobiography and popular sociology. The intellectual leadership of the New Left in Britain was overwhelmingly a movement of academic historians, and after the first years there are few plays, poems or novels to add to the chronicle. Doris Lessing was not a political novelist for long, whatever her continuing convictions. The first of John Osborne’s plays to be produced in the West End of London, *Look Back in Anger*, opened at the Royal Court Theatre in May 1956, months before the double trauma of the invasion of Hungary and the Suez War. The mood of its first act offered a vivid prediction of the New Left, then still unborn; and his next play, *The Entertainer* (1957), confirmed that mood. But Osborne shifted rapidly from the Left in the Sixties, and his

later plays occupy no easily definable place on the political map; while Arnold Wesker, whose early plays *Roots* (1959) and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* (1960) chime in with the mood of early Osborne, has since failed to hold a successful place in the London theatre. And the poems of Christopher Logue and Adrian Mitchell hang lightly in the balance.

In the wider field of cultural journalism, however, the New Left was more lastingly effective, both in periodicals and in paperbacks. The theatre criticism of Kenneth Tynan, the most influential dramatic critic in London from the early Fifties down to his appointment in 1963 as Literary Manager of the new National Theatre, gave massive journalistic support. Tynan had turned Brechtian with startling rapidity a few years after coming down from Oxford, after an early career dedicated to Noel Coward and Terence Rattigan. In 1955–6, reviewing productions of Brecht in Paris and London, he conceived German Epic Theatre to be the harsh medicine the West End needed to purge it of triviality, though on fashionable rather than dogmatic grounds: 'Unless we learn it soon, a familiar process will take place and the future of the theatre may have been strangled in its cot', he wrote in 1956,<sup>2</sup> and in a review of the same year he helped Osborne towards his resounding success. But the future will not hesitate to conclude that the New Left, as a sustained literary phenomenon, stands or falls as a kind of history and as a way of reading the past. Its contribution to fiction, poetry and the drama was lively for an instant, but too shortlived to count for much or for long.

This study, then, amounts to an obituary or autopsy on a school of history. In the worldly sense, it was a highly successful school. Some of its books sold massively enough to enrich their authors and to pitchfork them with notable suddenness into posts of enviable emolument. The New Left will some day deserve to be studied in these terms, when the accounts are opened and the wills are read; but it may already be hailed as an outstandingly successful event in consumer-appeal and a classic instance of advertising acumen. That, to be sure, may from the start have been among its objectives. But it cannot realistically have been its expectation, and its overtures were mournful. Both *The Uses of Literacy* and *Culture and Society* are pervaded by a sense of sorrowful nostalgia for a lost Europe when socialism once looked like a reasonable hope for intelligent men. These are sad, backward-looking books, obsessed with the 'residual

values' of a dying system of belief and with the daunting task, after the collapse of such high hopes, of saving something or other from a doctrinal wreck. Either could have served as well as an epitaph on the Old Left as a clarion call to a New. Publishers and authors alike are said to have been taken unawares by their success: the current of intellectual socialist revivalism was running stronger and deeper than anyone then guessed, and it was about to be propelled faster and harder still by events themselves. 'There is not much enthusiasm abroad among intellectuals in our time', wrote one of the contributors to *Out of Apathy* in 1960, in sorrowing vein, 'for the day when the last king will be strangled with the entrails of the last priest'.<sup>3</sup> That sentence would not have been possible five or ten years later. In 1960, ideology was widely supposed to be dead, a victim of a triumphant consumer society, and the drum-beats of the Thirties were thought forever stilled by the final and unforgivable Soviet apostasy at Budapest. The men of 1960 were building on a ruin, and knew it. And yet the ruin proved a foundation, after all, and on it they built.



Who were they? The evidence is not yet available to draw more than a sketch of the principal sages of the New Left in the Britain of the Sixties. But a social comparison with the only other generation of British literary Marxists – Auden, Day Lewis, Spender, Isherwood and their contemporaries in the Thirties – could prove enlightening.

The literary Marxist of the Thirties had been born in the first decade of the century of professional parents, and his education was almost always public school and Oxford or Cambridge. The New Left sage, by contrast, was born in the second decade or soon after, most often between the peace of 1918 and the General Strike of 1926. Mr Christopher Hill, who in 1965 became Master of Balliol, falls somewhat outside this pattern: he was born in 1912, which means that he was easily old enough to share in the political enthusiasms of the Spanish Civil War in 1936; he is a between-generations man. Hoggart was born in 1918, Williams in 1921, Thompson in 1924. Their parentage, as a group, is usually assumed to have been 'working-class'; this is not always true, but it remains true that it was often socially inferior to that of the typical Thirties intellectual. Hill is the son of a Methodist solicitor in York, and attended St

Peter's School there and then Balliol; Hoggart is the son of poor parents in Leeds who died when he was young, according to his own minutely circumstantial account in *The Uses of Literacy*, an account never seriously questioned; he attended local schools and in 1936 the University of Leeds. In 1939 he was accepted to read English at Cambridge, but was diverted by the war, in which he served as an officer. Williams was the son of a Monmouthshire railway signalman; he attended Abergavenny Grammar School, a Henry VIII foundation and at that time one of the few voluntary-aided schools in Wales, and then Trinity College, Cambridge, after which he too served as an officer in the war, returning later to complete his Cambridge degree. Edward Thompson, though younger than these, has an upbringing more like that of the older generation of Marxist intellectuals: his father had been a Methodist missionary in India who returned to England in 1923 to resign his ministry and live near Oxford, speaking and writing in favour of Indian independence; and his brother Frank was an active Communist until his death among the Bulgarian partisans in 1944.<sup>4</sup> Edward Thompson was schooled at Kingswood; he went from there to Cambridge to read history, joined the Communist Party as an undergraduate in 1942, went to war, finished his degree after the war and worked on a Yugoslav railway before the Stalin–Tito split of 1948.

The pattern of behaviour grows still clearer in adulthood, and it is a highly academic pattern. Hill became a Fellow of Balliol in 1938, after brief periods at All Souls (1934) and University College, Cardiff (1936). Hoggart, his war service over, became a staff tutor at Hull (1946–59) and later taught at the universities of Leicester (1959–62) and Birmingham (1962–70), to become an Assistant Director of UNESCO in Paris in 1970 and eventually principal of a London college. Williams, who completed his degree at Cambridge after the war, joined the Oxford University Extra-Mural Department in 1946 and became a lecturer in English at Cambridge in 1961, and later a professor and faculty chairman. Thompson was an extra-mural lecturer at Leeds from 1948 to 1965 and later a Reader in History at the new University of Warwick, from which he soon resigned to write *Warwick University Ltd* (1970), attacking the industrial connections of the new foundation and defending the student occupation of its registry in February 1970 to examine its 'secret files'.

The pattern is more than academic. It shows a marked tendency

towards authorship and public appearance rather than the routine of teaching, and above all a profound attraction towards the mass media. Hoggart served on the Pilkington Committee on Broadcasting in 1960–2 which advocated a bigger role for the public sector in television in defiance of commercial interests; Williams edited the *May Day Manifesto* (1967, revised and enlarged 1968), drafted by a group first meeting in the summer of 1966. The university is often the base for activity, but rarely the activity itself, and the sage does not confine his energies to his own students when he has a whole nation to teach. If he is not rapidly promoted by his university, or if he reaches the limits of promotion, he may rapidly leave it. Egalitarianism is a political ideal here, but it has nothing to do with private behaviour. The career of the New Left sage is marked by an intense consciousness of worldly success, a high competitive drive worthy of the best capitalistic entrepreneur, and a quietly affluent life-style.

A faint yet self-conscious ambiguity hangs over his social origins. A published conversation between Hoggart and Williams in the first number of the *New Left Review* (January–February 1960) touches on the matter with understandable delicacy. The article, which is entitled ‘Working-Class Attitudes’, records an exchange at what, surprisingly, was the first meeting between the two men, in August 1959, or a year or two after their most notable books had appeared; it begins ‘I’m glad that at last we’ve managed to meet.’ Together they fix the composition of *The Uses of Literacy* and *Culture and Society* in the early to mid-Fifties, that doldrum of intellectual socialism, and carefully establish that neither book owed anything to the other. No sage can publicly afford to be a disciple too. The conversation labours the theme of working-class origins. ‘We both came from working-class families’, one of them remarks, and they compare village Wales and suburban Leeds. The ambiguity of the exchange lies in the situation. When a successful man speaks of the humility of his origins, he necessarily emphasises how far he has climbed, and how open the system was that enabled him to do so. The system cannot have been so oppressive, then; but if it was not, protest is so much the harder to justify. ‘Most of us didn’t regard ourselves as poor’, one of them remarks, reporting that his father’s wage was two pounds and more a week. Does that imply ‘... and we were not’ or ‘... but really we were’? Both seem to sense the shadings and gradings of English social life and the inadequacy of terms like

'working class' and 'middle class' to meet the realities of British life; but that question is too subversive of conventional socialism to be pursued.

A similar ambiguity surrounds the relationship of most of the sages to the Communist Party. In the case of Hill and Thompson, the matter is clear in outline: they joined in youth, in the Thirties or early in the Second World War, and left in 1956–7 with the Soviet invasion of Hungary. What is unclear is why that invasion mattered so much to them: the Soviet invasions of Poland in September 1939 had been condoned or supported, after all, and of Finland and the Baltic states soon after. The Hitler–Stalin pact of August 1939 failed to outrage, but the restoration of a Communist dictatorship in Hungary was enough to shatter the allegiance of a lifetime. Had the facts changed, or had they – or had both? Hill's speech of resignation to the 1957 Easter Congress of the British Communist Party does not clearly answer this question, and its very obscurity may be significant. 'We have been living in a world of illusions', he told his Party comrades. 'That is why the twentieth congress of the Soviet Union and [the 1956 invasion of] Hungary came as such a shock. We had not been prepared for these events by our leaders. We have lived in a smug little world of our own invention.' That makes Hill sound like a simple dupe, which is unlikely, and an implausibly gullible one. Why should a Fellow of Balliol wait for his opinions to be prepared for him by his Party leaders? But the rest of his statement is in any case hardly compatible with a claim to honest ignorance: 'Some of us, including myself, have a grave responsibility for having hushed up some of the things we knew'.<sup>5</sup> So he had always known something to be wrong, and had prevented others from knowing it. But if he knew, why did he wait?

The cases of Hoggart and Williams are more mysterious: they are at once less well documented and harder to interpret. There is no clear evidence that Hoggart ever had connections with official communism, and only a little that he held fashionable Popular Front views in 1936–8 when he was studying English at Leeds. There is a letter in the university magazine which is probably his, calling on the Church to make of Christianity a revolutionary youth movement:

Far from shunning such things as politics and economics, it must lead the way to the new conception of its faith and doctrine em-



bracing and setting the true values on all such things. The modern situation has no use for the outworn theology of yesterday. It needs a new fiery faith, offering both spiritual and material content,

and the Church must realise that Christianity is 'a revolutionary, nay, a Communistic', faith.<sup>6</sup> It would be surprising if he remained altogether untouched by the Marxist enthusiasm of the late Thirties. But what counted for more were the novels of D. H. Lawrence, then widely imagined to have been the chief, almost the only, representative of the proletarian spirit in English letters, and the counter-vailing influence of the style and elegance of his Leeds professor, Bonamy Dobrée. But the early documentation is too thin to allow for more than guessing.

The other instance is better documented. On 23 January 1940 Williams supported Will Gallacher, the Communist Member of Parliament, against a motion at the Cambridge Union which condemned the Soviet Union for 'its recent unprovoked attack upon Finland', with Gallacher insisting that all things were justified in the Soviet cause:

It was a principle of international law that small states unable to defend themselves or to preserve their neutrality might be invaded. The Soviet Union was opening up a great vista of a brave new world, which could, however, only come into being – as could all revolutionary changes – with the accompaniment of pain and labour.<sup>7</sup>

Shortly after, on 27 February, the Union held a debate on the freedom of the press, in which Williams complained that all British newspapers except the *Daily Worker* expressed the same view, and attacked the capitalistic control of the press. He 'proved himself to be the most convincing exponent of Communist doctrines at present among the members of the House, and his speech had at least the merit of sincerity',<sup>8</sup> as the report ran. On 12 March, the day Finland announced her surrender to the Soviet Union and the cession of one-tenth of her territory, a 'Hands Off Russia' banner was raised in the Cambridge Union, and the chamber carried a motion 'That this house views with disapproval the sending of any military aid to Finland.'

It is equally clear, however, that by the end of the war, or soon after, Williams had abandoned his Communist allegiance. His shortlived periodicals *The Critic* (1947) and *Politics and Letters* (1947–8), which ran only to a few numbers before collapsing for lack of funds, were strenuously Leavisite in an old Cambridge–English tradition, but decidedly un-Stalinist in their politics, and even offered the hospitality of their columns to George Orwell. *Scrutiny* and the cult of T. S. Eliot seems to have pushed Moscow out, in his last year or two as a Cambridge undergraduate. *Culture and Society* was written in the early to mid-Fifties, its Conclusion being penned during the Suez–Hungary crisis of October 1956; and it represents a barely hopeful attempt to recover out of an English tradition of radical literature between Cobbett and the Fabians a native faith worthy to supplant a corrupted Stalinism. It is a very socialist book, and in some ways a Marxist one, but plainly not a Party manifesto. ‘The only thing that matters’, he wrote a few years later, ‘is the reality of Socialism’, calling for a revival of Marxism based on ‘a recovery of something like its whole tradition’. Even so, a youthful enthusiasm for Stalinism still looked worth justifying, though in oblique and apologetic terms. In the Thirties, he wrote in 1961,

Fascism had little to offer but terror . . . Soviet Communism, on the other hand, not only carried through an industrial revolution necessary in a backward country, but, much more crucially, carried through a cultural revolution which is not only an absolute human gain but which seems, still, in its achievements and its weaknesses alike, a specific product of a particular system.<sup>9</sup>

This is nearly identical in substance, though not in style, with the official Soviet position about the Stalinist years which has prevailed since Krushchev’s speech to the xx th Party congress in 1956. It does not in itself provide much evidence of any departure from the Party line. The Soviet example was still to be admired with reservations, as late as 1961, and still to be blessed: ‘It is difficult in the end to argue that the kind of society being created there is a negation of what is usually understood as the Marxist ideal.’ This is a tightrope-walk of an argument, and the balance is perilous. Marx was wrong, Williams goes on to concede, in his prediction that industrial states would pass through capitalism to socialism, since socialist revolutions have in the event mainly occurred in backward

and rural societies; that is not 'the way the world is going'. But what Marxism has to say about imperialism 'seems to me to make better sense than any other version of this now commanding issue', and peasant revolutions in China and Cuba are to be justified as 'an organic development of Marxism rather than a mere contradiction or abandonment of Marx'. So Marx was right if his assertions are reinterpreted in a Pickwickian sense. Often, in reading the sages of the New Left, one is reminded of the theological ingenuities of Christian modernism: not 'Honest to God', now, but 'Honest to Marx'.

The proximity of all this to the official Party line, first Soviet and later Chinese, often passes unnoticed; and even when it is noticed it is often understated. A double assumption is too easily accepted about the New Left: that it was not a Communist movement, and that it was not so much Marxist as *marxisant*. These assumptions may be true of many of its disciples; but they are not plainly true of its leaders. Of course, if 'Communist' means of the Party, then it is easy to show that the New Left was independent of the Party, and that it was even at times a thorn in its flesh. It is not clear, however, that this is a sufficient reason for denying its essential orthodoxy. On Soviet home policy, apart from the treatment of dissidents, on Soviet foreign policy before 1956, and on ideological questions generally, there have been few enough disagreements. The New Left never demanded an end to the one-party state in Russia. The monolithic political system created by Lenin after October 1917 was never brought into question by its debates in the Sixties, and the name of Lenin himself in those days stood beyond all possibility of criticism. The *May Day Manifesto* of 1967–8 backs Soviet foreign policy before Budapest to the hilt. During the Cold War, it argued,

Russia was portrayed [by the West] as an aggressive imperialist power, subverting western states by promoting revolutionary activities within their borders, while threatening them militarily with the might of a fully mobilized and victorious Red Army. . . . This account had never been true, even from the beginning. For the popular resistance movements in occupied Europe during the Second World War can be seen as agencies of Soviet imperialism only by the most grotesque historical distortion. They constituted authentic popular movements, with authentic revolutionary aspirations. . . . Far from giving overt and covert support to these movements in the immediate post-war period, Stalin was careful to withhold support from all revolutionary movements in western

or southern Europe when these might conflict with the agreements as to spheres of great-power influence entered into at Yalta.<sup>10</sup>

Stalin is seen as the righteously injured party, cautious even to excess; the Greek resistance received 'neither aid nor encouragement from the Soviet Union' in 1945, and Stalin only reluctantly accepted Tito's assumption of power in 1945 and Mao's in 1949. If Stalin repressed opposition in Eastern Europe, this was 'in some part a consequence of the siege mentality and political degeneration occasioned by western pressure', and the Berlin blockade was caused by American encouragement of 'Western German resurgence'.<sup>11</sup> This account, it is true, is followed by a brief reference to 'the idiocies and crimes of Stalin's last years',<sup>12</sup> but that remark cannot refer to his more massive exterminations, since these occurred in the Thirties and Forties. Indeed Williams is on record elsewhere as not always or consistently opposed to that. 'I remember feeling, in the late 1930s', he wrote in 1961, 'when political terror was being used both in the Soviet Union and in Nazi Germany, how much strength there seemed to be in the argument that these were really the same kinds of society: the new kind of totalitarian state. But I eventually rejected this conclusion then, and I reject it now.' This was on the ground already quoted: that, unlike fascism, Soviet communism had 'not only carried through the industrial revolution necessary in a backward country' but a cultural revolution too.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that mass terror and extermination can be justified, in this system of belief, provided that the industrial and cultural rewards are sufficiently high. It also confirms that ignorance of the Terror was not a condition of intellectual Stalinism in the Thirties.

There is no grave difficulty in identifying this position. It is a sort of latter-day Stalinism with a gloss of cultural analysis. Even the word 'democratic' is used in a classic Party sense: United States aid to Greece, according to the *May Day Manifesto*, 'had served to bolster a series of corrupt and anti-democratic régimes' between 1946 and 1958. So Greece, in this use of language, was not a democracy in the 1950s. The purity of these doctrines, in the chemical sense of the word, cannot seriously be doubted. This was once the Soviet line and by the 1960s had become, most characteristically, the Peking line.

It is not usually noticed, moreover, that the heroes of the New Left

were commonly members of a Communist Party. Lenin must stand first in line: he was the god of the New Left, and it would be hard to find any fundamental disparagement of his life or works in any document of the school before Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* began to appear in the West in 1974. More Party men follow in the canon of New Left saints: Mao Tse-tung; Ho Chi Minh, whose first syllable, shouted thrice, became the slogan of street demonstration; Che Guevara; Angela Davis, a member of the American Communist Party; Jimmy Reid of Clydeside, a member of the British; and Pablo Neruda of the Chilean, eventually Allende's ambassador in Paris. Set these names together, and the alleged independence of the New Left from the Party becomes hard to sustain and essential to qualify. In the fragmentation of official communism that occurred after the Hungarian invasion and the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s, the New Left looks much like an intellectual fragment representing the Peking view in a nation where official communism is almost entirely pro-Soviet.

What is more, the New Left always believed in old-style socialism at home. In its domestic policies it was New only in the sense of being a revival of the Old. Its relations with the Labour Party showed it to be strenuously anti-revisionist, fiercely loyal to Clause Four and fearful of any attempt to reinterpret socialism by any greater tolerance for the principles of market economics or any questioning of nineteenth-century orthodoxies like the class war. Anyone who suggested that modern capitalism was ceasing to be 'class-structured' could always depend on a rap on the knuckles from the New Left. In domestic affairs it was diehard socialist. 'Our task is urgent', wrote Norman Birnbaum in the foreword to *Out of Apathy*. 'Influential sections of the Labour movement have proposed the abandonment of further experiments with common ownership – and therewith, the abandonment of socialism – just when the successes of the Soviet Union foreshadow large political gains for the Communist parties in western Europe.' Gaitskellism, it was resolved, shall not pass.

In its canon of heroes, then, and in much of its policy, the New Left was strenuously anti-revisionist. But this leads into a puzzle. For in one respect, at least, it always claimed to be revisionist. It totally backed Destalinisation in the Soviet Union; *Out of Apathy* complained that not enough had yet been done in that direction. The Williams article of 1961 condemns extermination as a political

weapon, though only in retrospect, and fully accepts that it was an essential aspect of Stalin's Russia. The *New Left Review* in 1974 sympathetically reviewed the first volume of *The Gulag Archipelago* in an article of genuine humanity. The New Left was both for and against political violence. But that is not necessarily a contradiction: it may, after all, imply some important moral discriminations. The question needs to be enlarged upon.

Perhaps the best approach would be to list those acts of socialist violence which the New Left approved in its heyday in the Sixties; those it failed to condemn; and those which it unreservedly condemned.

Socialist violence openly approved included the overthrow of the Russian Provisional Government in October 1917, the ensuing civil war, and Lenin's extermination of his enemies; the occupation of Eastern Europe by the Red Army in 1944–5 and the destruction of anti-Communist elements there; Hanoi's 'war of liberation' to annex South Vietnam in the 1960s;<sup>14</sup> and a wide variety of guerrilla actions scattered around the world, including Guevara's campaign in Bolivia, the Provisional I.R.A. (with growing reservations), and the Palestinian struggle. (The last two were only dubiously socialist, it is true; but many thought them to be so.)

Violence not condemned, even in retrospect, includes the Soviet occupation of eastern Poland in 1939 and later of parts of Finland and all the Baltic states; the Chinese conquest of Tibet in 1951; and the enormous if ill-documented exterminations conducted by the Chinese Communists after achieving power in 1949, which are estimated to have totalled tens of millions.

Acts of socialist violence which were condemned make a shorter list. There are perhaps only three: Stalin's exterminations in the Thirties and after; the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956; and of Czechoslovakia in 1968.

Why were these last three events excluded from the approval of the New Left? The answer is not clearly offered in any New Left document; and so I propose some possible solutions in a tentative vein:

1. All three acts – Stalin's exterminations, Budapest and Prague – were committed by the Soviet state. If the New Left was essentially a Maoist fragment in rebellion against a pro-Soviet British Communist Party, then these positions look self-consistent and even natural.

2. All three acts were committed against other socialists. This proposition is only doubtfully true, but it was fully accepted by the New Left. Stalin's purge of the late Thirties was of Old Bolsheviks, among others, and a loyal Leninist might indeed have cause to resent it. And it was readily assumed, and often proclaimed, that the Hungarians and Czechs were seeking their own 'roads to socialism'. Nobody, on the other hand, imagined that the Tibetans were socialists in 1951.

3. All three were acts committed by the obviously strong against the obviously weak. If it is right to suppose that the youthful idealism of the New Left was not merely rhetorical, then an instinctive reaction of horror as the Russian tanks rolled into Prague must count for something. That reaction was common to almost the whole of British, and indeed, Western opinion in 1968: it would be surprising if the New Left were untouched by it. Their idealism was surely in some sense real, if selective: it was for Chinese invasions and against Soviet invasions.



Behind the headlines and the street demonstrations, the New Left was always and emphatically a movement of lofty intellectual pretension. Its language was laboriously polysyllabic, its obsessions intensely abstracted. This was a world of dizzying extremes. A vast, schizophrenic gap separated its two hemispheres: one a sort of political equivalent of soccer hooliganism, disrupting universities or shouting 'Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh' to a line of policemen in a swaying mob; the other the earnest and subdued atmosphere of the *groupuscule*, solemnly debating in a bedsitter the sociology of thought or the theory of 'structures of feeling' in companionable or fissiparous coteries. That life was no more schizophrenic, it may be argued, than the life of an Eton schoolboy who divides his day between mathematics (or Greek verse) and football. With the New Left, however, work and play were reversed. For the schoolboy, Greek is work and football is play. But in the intellectual progress of Marxism since the war, it is ideas that are toys, albeit in the most solemn of games; it is in physical action like a demo or guerrilla violence that reality ultimately exists. Ideas are what keep you happy, more or less, while the world waits for revolution. Sartre, even in his existentialist days, always insisted that the ultimate truth lay in

revolution, the propositions of philosophy being worthy of attention only as intellectual diversions while one stood in wait. The metaphysic of the New Left, in a similar way, was a plaything to keep the faithful occupied. That is why it would be mistaken to regard the decline of intellectual Marxism in the 1970s as a lasting fact, just as it is now obvious that it was mistaken to have taken its decline in the 1950s as likely to last. It can re-emerge when the world situation encourages it to do so. And its ideal conditions for emergence would be similar to those of the Vietnam war, when an international Communist interest could be made to coincide with a popular campaign at home.

Some of these metaphysical toys, however, deserve a brief dissection.

The sages of the New Left were deeply committed to an analysis of contemporary culture. On the most immediate and practical level, this amounted to a preoccupation with the mass media, as in Hoggart's part in the Pilkington Report or Williams's study *Communications* (1962). Hoggart's collection of essays, *Speaking to Each Other* (1970), sums up this preoccupation in its very title, though he belongs to the mildest, most pragmatic and most literary extreme of the movement. His views are marked by a distaste for private ownership and advertising and a veneration for state monopoly which the socialist mind traditionally, if inexplicably, associates with liberation. The state, in this view, though already by far the biggest capitalist, should be bigger still; and though the B.B.C. already predominates in broadcasting, it ought to dominate altogether. It was always one of the curiosities of this revolutionary movement that it thought big capital should be bigger, provided only it belongs to the state, and cultural power concentrated even more efficiently than it already is.

The preoccupation with culture was itself intensely historical. A Victorian emphasis is altogether intelligible, since socialism is a Victorian doctrine: it amounted to a return, and often a nostalgic one, to the roots of ideology in an age when its scriptures were first composed and when history itself seemed about to fulfil the Marxist prediction of class war in the new industrial states. Some of its jargon is readily identifiable: 'social', in the historical prose of the New Left sages, as in R. H. Tawney's before them, commonly means almost nothing at all: it is a term of art that can be removed from many a sentence without loss of sense; but then if you believe



that all reality is social, or have once believed it, that is only to be expected. (The word 'societal' was soon adopted to fill the gap left by the devaluation of 'social' itself.) 'Central', too, is a key word in such prose: its origins lie in the *Scrutiny* of the 1930s and 1940s, where it became a cult word to applaud a familiar Cambridge species of moral edification through literary education; in New Left prose it continued to mean 'on our side', so that the writings of Carlyle, Ruskin and Morris might be called central in a way that Tennyson's and Meredith's were not. A minute stylistic critique of New Left prose in the Sixties would be largely unrewarding: it was bad prose, fat with syntactical excess and reverent of obscurity. But it was a prose in the last degree academic, and its badness was always cap-and-gowned: not merely polysyllabic, but laborious in syntax and intensely abstract in terminology. Much of it looked as if it had been recently and imperfectly translated from a German academic treatise of the nineteenth century. Perhaps its most extravagant instances relate to the criticism of films, in that context invariably called 'film'. Even the liveliest of twentieth-century popular arts could be reduced through the rhetoric of the New Left to the obscurity of a German forest.<sup>15</sup>

The cultural analysis of the Victorians, being based on an exclusive reading of favoured texts, flourished in a heady indifference to historical research. This is the richest area of fantasy in the mythology of the New Left, and facts of history were rarely allowed to violate it. The British industrial revolution of the nineteenth century was unremittingly seen as an age of triumphant *laissez-faire*, in spite of the Factory Acts; an heroic working class was invented to oppose a capitalism red in tooth and claw; and a band of courageous thinkers and writers were glorified for speaking the truth in defiance of a parliament representing only the hypocrisy of a possessing class that seldom heeded the cry of hunger. The New Left sage, rightly enough, saw himself as the natural successor to the Victorian social critics. He was above all a moralist, like them, and his concern for exact historical realities was no greater than Carlyle's or Ruskin's.

Some of the master myths of the New Left were vividly at odds with one another, and its own sense of mounting epistemological confusion began to weaken its confident cohesion even before the Sixties were out. Social conditioning was among the most agonising. Marx had held that mankind is subject to the conditioning of social circumstance, but equally that (as he put it in the *Third Thesis on*

Feuerbach), 'circumstances are changed precisely by men'. In his modern disciples, this conflict grew none the easier through debate. Man is a master; but he is also a slave. He can choose to be or have anything ('*Soyez réaliste: demandez l'impossible*'); but he is also the victim of social pressure. Subjected to his conditioning, he yet retains the power to rise above it. So his subjection cannot have been total. But where, if it is not total, does it begin and end?

The sociology of thought cultivated by the New Left was always a massively reductive system, and in the end it was to sink under the weight of its own increasing subjectivism. Its struggle for survival paradoxically depended on excluding itself from its own system. Conditioning, like 'structures of feeling', is essentially what other people are supposed to have. Just as few socialists imagine that the doctrine of equality applies to themselves, so none supposes that his own political convictions are the result of social pressures similar to those he claims to observe working upon others. There can be few, if any, Marxist intellectuals who suppose themselves to be Marxists because social conditioning made them so. Every individual, surely, to the extent that his belief is serious, believes that he thinks as he does because what he thinks is true. That, in principle, is an entirely acceptable assumption. But what are we to say to the man who tells us, in effect: 'I am a Marxist because Marxism is true; but you are a liberal, because nurtured in a parliamentary state like the British. . .'.

Sometimes the answer to this sort of thing is clear and simple. It happens that my own upbringing was in the Thirties, in an atmosphere more or less Popular Front. So it cannot be true that I believe as I do because of conditioning, if 'conditioning' means early intellectual influence. If it includes the total social and economic system as well, then the case, as matter of ordinary observation, is still weak: most young Poles, Czechs and Yugoslavs, when free to talk, express an indifference to Marxism that often borders on contempt or hatred. On grounds of observation, the sociology of thought pursued by the New Left always looked implausible. Anyone can reasonably claim exemption from it, even those who affect to believe it. And to claim that exemption is the only reasonable course: it is a liberty one might well be proud to claim and to avow.

It was an attendant assumption that the truth of a proposition is weakened or destroyed by demonstrating, or claiming to demonstrate, that it was based on social conditioning. This is a sur-

prising assumption. Suppose, to put the matter at its simplest, that I believe X for no reason but that I was brought up to believe it. This is doubtless a highly inadequate reason for believing it. But it is also a highly inadequate reason for rejecting it. The truth-content of X remains whatever it is. Even if one only prefers the parliamentary system to one-party socialism because of upbringing, the case for parliamentarism is neither the better nor the worse for that – like the case for supposing that two plus two equals four. The truth of a proposition is independent of the factors that cause it to be believed or disbelieved.



The New Left was widely accepted from the start as a youth movement. In its leadership, at least, it was never that. At the climax of its shortlived success, in 1968–9, its literary leaders in Britain were aged between their mid-forties and their mid-fifties. They were already everything implied by the word middle-aged. One may wonder if, in intellectual history, there ever was such a thing as a youth movement. The young copy: they do not invent. The Children's Crusade was not devised by children. In Hitler Youth rallies, middle-aged men with bare knees marched in front. And in universities in the Sixties the protest movement was not merely captured by such men: it was their intellectual creation from the start. They wrote the books and articles, gave the lectures and edited the journals, and demonstrated in Grosvenor Square. More than one former student militant has since revealed that he knew nothing of organised protest until he reached a university and heard it in a lecture. Enthusiasm, once kindled, might pass from student to student; but it was not invented by a student. Even the leadership of our political parties was a contributory influence here. Many wondered when, in the late Sixties, the shy, demure student of earlier years turned into a jargon-stuffed oaf screaming abuse and obscenities. But in 1963–5 two political parties elected middle-aged leaders publicly praised for a virtue called 'abrasiveness'. Some of our parliamentary life, before the New Left was born, had already turned into a public model that was harsh and crude.

The middle-aged men who made and led the New Left, however, were often content to leave abrasiveness to their disciples. In Britain, at least, the sage at his most characteristic was bland. His literary

tone was as far from the revolutionary as the artifices of style could render it. Edward Thompson, in a review of Williams's *Long Revolution*, wittily imagined the book to have been written by 'an elderly gentlewoman and near relative of Mr [T. S.] Eliot, so distinguished as to have become an institution: The Tradition. There she sits, with that white starched affair on her head, knitting definitions . . . – and in her presence how one must watch one's LANGUAGE!',<sup>16</sup> and he appositely quoted Orwell on the revolutionary: 'Not merely while but by fighting the bourgeoisie, he becomes a bourgeois himself.' But then the sage, almost by definition, was always righteous in his own eyes; and to be left-wing, or once to have been that, necessarily and always guaranteed virtue. Left may be mistaken, in its own view; but Left is never bad. 'I have been encountering the paradox', wrote Thompson in 1973, reproving a backslider who had escaped from Eastern Europe, 'that many of those whom "reality" has proved to be wrong still seem to me to have been better people than those who were, with a facile and conformist realism, right.'<sup>17</sup> That enviable conviction would indeed justify all, and a claim to an especial and superior virtue rings consistently through the annals of the Old Left and the New.

Since the death of D. H. Lawrence in 1930, these were almost the first literary intellectuals in England to seek to embody the fading myth of a revolutionary proletariat. Like Lawrence in his later years, they consistently exaggerated the humility of their origins, or allowed them to be exaggerated. Their parentage was sometimes humble, but rarely of the humblest; their education was always better than average, and often much better; and they all entered universities and prospered there, years before the Butler Education Act of 1944. They later attained rank and affluence. Their self-pity ought not to be easily indulged. Early in *The Uses of Literacy* Hoggart, in answer to his question 'Who Are the Working Classes?', estimates the normal weekly wage of those he describes at 1954 prices; and though I have never thought of myself as working class, I can well remember living on less than half that figure for years. The myth of deprivation here is a highly implausible myth. Many millions of their compatriots in the Thirties and Forties were poorer than these men.

In the political struggle of the Sixties, especially inside universities, the sage took up a vantage-point of tactical interest. It is a position hard to define: perhaps it might best be called the Extreme Right of the Extreme Left. The middle-aged academic, watching his fading

Marxist convictions almost miraculously revived by an unexpected turn of history, suddenly found himself no longer a mere survivor of the Thirties but a possible centre of attention. Who in the Fifties could have guessed that the young of the Sixties, eager for a sense of community, would think they had found it in Victorian socialism or a vanishing subculture of our industrial life? Pastoralism was stronger than we had dreamt.

But the situation must have had its unnerving aspects. The new acolytes were a surprising species: they were not the children of the Jarrow hunger marchers but of prosperous parents. Sir Geoffrey Jackson has remarked of his imprisonment by Tupamaro guerrillas in Uruguay that his kidnappers all seemed to him upper-middle-class, or his social superiors in origin. The sage was hardly a prisoner like the ambassador, and his emotions must have been, for the most part, more consoling: a sudden joy at finding himself taken seriously by the young; a gush of pride at being accepted by those who were themselves socially so acceptable; and a sudden discovery that a social origin once felt to be uninteresting if not positively embarrassing might, in a new atmosphere, be turned to an undreamt-of account. Such sages are as remote as imagination can conceive from the hairy revolutionaries they contrived for a time to lead. They were prosperous, and wished to be more so; they were at least as anxious for academic promotion as most of their colleagues, and commonly attained it; they found it more than acceptable, in reviewing the books of other men, to drop the titles of their own in casual references; their life-style was more than moderately comfortable. Not less than most they loved silver on the table, a big car and Mediterranean holidays. 'It is one of the consolations of middle-aged reformers', as Saki once remarked 'that the good they inculcate must live after them if it is to live at all.' Above all, they were infatuated with the manners of upper-class life. 'I remember', wrote Hoggart of his old professor at Leeds, 'being struck right away by his "style" ' – his military phrases, his tweeds and pipe-tobacco, and his mannered voice; and he tells how the professor became a 'substitute father' for him, teaching him how to employ an 'upper-class intellectual's directness' and to drink gin.<sup>18</sup> All this bespeaks what might be called the soft eiderdown of English life: its eagerness to accept rebels and to absorb them, its lack of barriers, though never of distinctions, and its notorious capacity to transform the potential revolutionary into a pillar of the Establishment. The New Left sage

was an Establishment Revolutionary. A pillar was what he wanted to become, and in Britain at least he usually succeeded.

But the ambiguity of his situation remained: that he continued to claim and to exercise a right to condemn the system that rewarded him handsomely and provided him with the free press and broadcasting system through which to condemn it. If the press is capitalist-controlled, why did it print him? Because, no doubt, our press barons are all eiderdowns too, and know what to do with intellectual revolutionaries. The sage, in short, held revolutionary views, or at least enjoyed the reputation of holding them, without performing any revolutionary function. It was in that sense that he stood on the Right of the Left. It was a tactical position, and adroitly chosen. Not for him the pathetic fate of the ageing Theodor Adorno of Frankfurt, complaining at a time of student violence in 1968 that he had intended in his lectures and writings only to devise a theoretical methodology: 'How was I to know that people would try to realise it with Molotov cocktails?' In British universities there were no Molotov cocktails, and violence remained largely a threat.

The sage was a calculating intelligence, after all, and his calculations were not naïve. He could attend a demonstration partly in order to be seen, and partly to ensure that few or no windows were broken. He might sit on a militant committee, but in order to persuade it not to burn down the faculty building because a consultative committee was about to be set up, or because it had already been set up but had not yet reported. He would insist on courses and programmes on communications, film, Victorian social criticism and the theory of revolution without being actively in favour of classes or programmes of a contrary vein being broken up; but if they were broken up, he would be against punishing the wreckers, on grounds that would inevitably include the word victimisation.

It was a position that called for agility; but it proved, in the short run, indispensable. In any compromise arising out of crisis, the sage had to be there. His claim to speak for the young might not be totally accepted, but he clearly spoke for some of them, and those the most dangerous. On the other hand, he spoke to them as well as for them, and could be counted on to dissuade them from the extremest courses. He was not an arsonist, or a murderer, or even an assailant, though infinitely understanding of the motives of those who were. In all these ways, at least, the New Left was indeed new. It was a system of belief rather than of action. It served international com-

munism by word and gesture, but unlike the Old Left of the Thirties it did not belong to it. It had no formal organisation, only the shifting and shiftless world of *groupuscules* sensitive to political unorthodoxy and suspicious of leaders. It had no promised land, as the Old Left had the Russia that Lenin and Stalin made. Its violence, though at times alarming, was self-expressive and served no purpose visible to the politically informed.

This was the uneasy kingdom of middle-aged men of letters whose real taste was for leisured talk and a quiet life. The world may mock the pretensions of those who, having supported in youth the greatest act of mass murder in European history, could offer themselves in maturity as the moral exemplars of a whole generation. But no man, unless the most envious, need begrudge them the fortunes they made or the enjoyment they won.