Intellectuals and the Labour Movement
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In this article I shall try to do three things. First, I shall have to explain the way I use the term intellectual, second I shall discuss the political role of intellectuals in the past few years, and lastly I shall say something about the tasks of marxist intellectuals, as I see them. But all my article assumes something that is new in the developed capitalist world, namely the existence of a large body of intellectuals, possibly a majority, who are profoundly critical of capitalist society. One of the symptoms of the profound and dramatic changes in this society, which preceded its present crisis, was the appearance of such a mass of radically dissenting intellectuals in and around the universities in the 1960s. This phenomenon may or may not be permanent, and it is not without precedent; for instance during the birth-crisis of industrial capitalism between 1830 and 1848. And, of course, in the marginal countries of capitalism and the underdeveloped world it is familiar. In the developed capitalist countries, where between 1848 and the 1930s most student movements were on the political right, if they existed at all, it is new, though a certain minor shift to the left occurred during the last great phase of capitalist crisis in the 1930s and during the war.

Let me now turn to my first theme, which is a necessary preliminary clarification of terms. What are "the intellectuals"?

I accept, first, Gramsci's suggestion that every society and social group requires certain specialised functions to be carried out, ranging from the technical to what may be broadly called the ideological, and that the people who carry them out are intellectuals. This does not mean (and I am not sure how far Gramsci wants it to mean) that these intellectuals, sometimes quite a small body, necessarily form a group or stratum which is distinct from the class or group that has given rise to them, let alone a group with specific social interests across other social dividing lines as a stratum of intellectuals. Sometimes they plainly do not. For instance, officers who carry out the function of intellectuals in armies, e.g., on the general staff or as instructors in military academies, are much less distinct from other officers than from other intellectuals. These, if I understand Gramsci correctly, are what he calls "organic intellectuals". However, if these functions require a numerically large body of people to carry them out, it is of course likely that this body will develop corporate interests, a corporate identity, etc., especially if its functions are technically rather specialised. For instance, corporation and tax lawyers are undoubtedly organic intellectuals of capitalism, but as practitioners of a rather esoteric discipline, they have something in common as lawyers as well as servants of business.

Special Training

Second, however, Gramsci observes that past societies have produced bodies of intellectuals which persist, and whose functions are in varying degrees adaptable for the purposes of new classes and societies. These are what he calls the "traditional intellectuals"—for instance the clergy or the university teachers. But I would go rather further and suggest that this persistence of "traditional" intellectuals expressed not only the combined and uneven development of history, but also the fact that the function of intellectuals is almost always linked to the possession of particular skills which can normally only be acquired by special training in special institutions, i.e., in schools. In generally illiterate societies these skills begin with the easy command of reading and above all writing ("clerks") and even today in many parts of Africa this is still so. Intellectuals are drawn from those attending at least secondary school. In literate societies the situation is more complex, but attendance at some form of higher education is still the easiest way to become eligible for membership of the intellectuals. And the quickest way of defining intellectuals is as people who have successfully undergone the required level of schooling. But this, of course, applies to most "organic" intellectuals as well as to "traditional" ones, and provides common ground for both. They have been ground down between the same sort of millstones.

But there is a third point. With some exceptions the bulk of what I would call "organic" intellectuals carry out specific technical functions for their class or in the society dominated by their class, and therefore undergo specific, sometimes highly vocational training for them—for instance as accountants, as technologists or whatever. This may incidentally give them strong corporate interests, and if—as is
usual today—they are mainly employed for a wage or salary, interests in common with other wage-earners, e.g., as potential trade unionists. On the other hand I suggest that it also tends to identify many or most of them more easily with the class whose organic intellectuals they are, as with doctors, engineers or technocrats in firmly bourgeois societies. In fact, in such societies groups of this kind may not consider themselves to be intellectuals at all or be considered intellectuals, but simply members of the class into which they are socially and economically integrated, and from which many of them may be recruited. Thus the traditional bourgeois definition of an intellectual abstracts completely from his or her functional activity or social situation. An engineer in himself, or a banker or even a publisher are called "intellectuals" only if they happen to like reading hard books or going to concerts of classical music.

Conversely, people who normally were and are called intellectuals and see themselves as such, were and are mainly drawn from among those persons who hold jobs for which the qualification is one which does not teach them anything about holding specific jobs, or who are in the process of being taught general but non-vocational intellectual skills and knowledge. This situation may or may not make them socially somewhat marginal; but we ought to recall that in imperial China learning about the ancient classics was a way to become rich and a member of the ruling class, and in modern France as well. The accumulation of what Pierre Bourdieu calls "cultural capital" is increasingly hard to separate from that of economic capital.

Their Sheer Size

Here, once again, Gramsci's distinction between "traditional" and "organic" intellectuals seems to me to be less clear or important than he thought. On the other hand I rather think that the social origin and the form of training of intellectuals are highly relevant. It is important to know whether a person or group belongs to the first generation to have received a higher education or not; whether he or she passes through an established set of educational institutions or a new or transformed one; whether he or she belongs to the, now diminishing, group of the individually or collectively self-educated; and so on.

But whatever the nature of intellectuals, one point about them is of considerable practical importance, namely their sheer size as a social group. Let me say very rapidly and approximately, that in the past their numbers were relatively and often absolutely small, that they are today vastly larger, and that the relative or absolute growth probably still continues. I leave you to consider the reasons for this. Let me simply point out, by way of illustration, that the proportion of students in West Germany in the 1970s was, relative to the total population, about thirty times greater than in the Germany of the 1870s. Now quite small groups of intellectuals can, as we shall see, play a very significant part in the politics of their countries, but we are today dealing, in Britain as elsewhere, with a very substantial mass of people, though not necessarily a homogeneous one.

Workers and Intellectuals

So much for what intellectuals are. But I want to make a third initial distinction—namely between the types of participation of intellectuals in the movements of other classes. Broadly speaking in the developing bourgeois countries of the west, which also happen to have been mainly countries of legal mass politics, intellectuals have tended to attach themselves to wider political and social movements such as the labour movement, but in the less developed or underdeveloped countries, which have also often lacked bourgeois democracy or political legality, they largely took the place of such movements, though they usually claimed only to keep the place warm until the workers themselves went into action. There are also intermediate cases such as Italy and parts of the Habsburg Empire which I merely mention in passing. Thus, to take two extreme cases, the British Labour and Communist parties grew up as basically proletarian bodies with a small number of intellectuals attached, while the social democratic party or parties of Tsarist Russia were overwhelmingly composed of intellectuals who claimed to—and actually did—represent the workers. It does not follow that every group of marxist intellectuals does.

At this point the question of the relation between workers and intellectuals within such movements becomes relevant. Broadly speaking, the more developed the class organisation of the manual workers, the greater what the French call its ouvrierisme, i.e., its suspicion of people who are not manual workers—subject to some extent, to the strength of the movement's socialist ideology, which makes workers willing to accept anyone identified with the movement, irrespective of class origin or profession. An obvious example are the most purely proletarian organisations, the unions. In the major western industrial countries, Britain, the USA, Germany and France, it is probably still inconceivable that a man of non-working class origin could become the leader of a major union of manual workers, but this is not so in underdeveloped or semi-developed countries. Indeed, even today in Italy the general secretary of the metalworkers is
an intellectual. Roughly speaking, the more backward and underdeveloped the country and its labour movement, the more outsiders are welcomed as leaders and interlocutors, and indeed often their status as intellectuals—e.g. as lawyers or professors—used to be an actual asset. How far this distinction remains valid is another question.

The Last Decade
So much for clarification and definitions. Now let me turn to the present, that is to say, broadly speaking, the past ten or twelve years. One thing is fairly obvious about this period. During the past few years and especially since 1968, groups of intellectuals have played an unusually prominent and important part in the political and social movements of their nations. This applies to the developed capitalist countries, the socialist countries and the third world, if you will excuse my using that familiar but unsatisfactory term. This applies not only to students as a body, though theirs is the most spectacular example. I am thinking here of the role of students in 1968-70 in France, Italy, West Germany, the USA, Poland, Yugoslavia, Brazil and Mexico—indeed there are more examples—and in the 1970s in Thailand, Turkey and Iran. Their action has set off massive working class movements, initiated the overthrow of governments or produced major responses from governments; including, of course, severe repression. However other and smaller bodies of intellectuals have also played an important and often dramatic part—for instance in Czechoslovakia, both during 1968 and since—I am thinking of Charter 77—in Poland, in the resistance to military regimes in Brazil and Greece and to Mrs. Gandhi’s state of emergency in India.

Now this role derives largely from the three major assets of intellectuals as a group, even as a relatively not very numerous group. They are articulate and have access to media of communication, within the limits of what is permitted at home, more freely abroad. They possess built-in networks of communication even in very unfavourable conditions. And through schools and universities they have ready-made institutions for getting together and acting collectively, many of these being situated in capital cities or other places where action is easily noticed. In short, they can act politically when nobody else can, outside the actual power-structure. This is naturally of the greatest importance in countries where political action from below is restricted or prohibited. There they may be the only independent fora for political expression. Unfortunately there are quite a lot of such countries in the world today, though fortunately in a good many of them the minimum of expression is allowed, or no longer effectively prevented, without which nothing would be possible. That is why there are dissidents in the USSR. However, as the example of France, Italy and West Germany in 1968-69 shows, even in bourgeois-democratic countries intellectuals—in the form of student movements—have used their assets to break through the crust which had hardened over their countries’ politics and made possible the release of forces which had built up below it—including in the working class.

Their Strength—and Weakness
The enormous strength of intellectuals therefore has been their capacity to start things off in situations when nobody else could have done so, outside the power structure. On the other hand their prominence has been due not to their own force as a social group—which I shall say something about later—but to situations which, for one reason or another, made it difficult or impossible for anyone else to take such an initiative. And—this is of crucial importance—unless others take up the lead of the intellectuals, or respond to it in some way, their independent movements are almost certainly too weak to get very far on their own. Students can start revolutions but not make them. Of course their movements may make a lot of difference to matters of specific corporate concern to intellectuals such as university reform, but that is not what I am talking about at the moment. That is the essential weakness of their position.

Yet we ought not to stress the evident weakness of intellectuals’ movements in isolation without also underlining the limitations of the movements of the labouring classes without the intellectuals. This was recognised long ago by both Kautsky and Lenin, and Lenin’s distinction between the purely “trade-unionist” class consciousness which, he argued, was all that the workers would develop by themselves, and the “socialist consciousness” which would be brought into their movement from outside, is familiar. One could argue about this as a historical generalisation, but, as always when Lenin talks about concrete political practice, he puts his finger on a genuine problem. In countries with legal mass political organisation, the danger of mass parties and trade unions drifting into limited corporative actions or short-term tactical operations, and losing sight of the longer-term objectives and strategy, is real. In countries without such political legality, or with young and inexperienced movements of the labouring classes, the task of creating effective national political or class mobilisations, may be difficult or impossible without outside initiative and participation. If intellectuals alone cannot get far, workers and peasants also need intellectuals. And this, I suggest, applies not only in third-world countries but also, in rather different ways, in developed ones.
Growing Prominence

Now the second thing that is fairly obvious about intellectuals in recent years is that, in the developed countries, they have become far more prominent within the labour, socialist and communist movements than before. The typical Labour candidate between the wars was a miner or railwayman, but today he or she is much more likely to be someone described as a "lecturer". This impression is confirmed by a look at the active membership of most divisional Labour Parties. On the continent it is even more obvious among social-democratic parties, especially where some of them have virtually died out in their old proletarian-based form and been replaced, as in France or Spain, by what has been perceptively called "Euro-socialist" parties. Without going into the evidence, I think this also applies in many communist parties, in spite of the fact that these are the parties which have tried most systematically and consistently to bring forward working-class cadres. And as for the ultra-left or new left, it is quite evident that the great bulk of the activists in this collection of groups and organisations are not manual workers, however proletarian the labels they tie on themselves.

And yet this increasing participation of intellectuals in such movements cannot be welcomed without some very serious qualifications. For it represents two phenomena, both of which risk widening the gap between workers and intellectuals, or at least which conceal potential divergences between them. On the one hand we have a multiplication of left wing or even marxist intellectuals; on the other, and more dangerously, we have a simultaneous relative decline in the manual workers' participation in labour movements—except in the actual trade unions of manual workers, which form a declining proportion of the total. This decline is due both to the relative decline of old fashioned manual labour in the modern economy and also, at the level of cadres, to some extent to an actual transfer of potential cadres from workers to intellectuals through the main mechanism of social mobility, namely the educational process. In one way this has been politically positive. Between, say, 1970 and 1939 the classic road of social mobility out of the manual working class led partly to professions like school-teaching and lower office jobs in the public sector, which did not cut people off entirely from working class ways and the labour movement—especially in the old industrial areas—but largely to white-collar jobs in the private sector—e.g., as clerks—which tended to turn them into Tories or even potential supporters of fascism. The mass transfer to various kinds of mainly subaltern intellectual occupations has been much more likely to lead them to, or keep them on, the left. Yet there is a major difference between an able working class boy or girl who stays on the shop floor and the same person who becomes a socialist militant as a social worker or polytechnic lecturer, and those young workers who never make it to A or O levels are keenly aware of this difference. Students or ex-students are not the same as workers, even when they think they are or ought to be.

Danger of the Ghetto

But even when they wish to identify most passionately with the cause of the workers, the very fact that intellectuals are today a rather numerous body, both as a social stratum and as a sector of the left, creates the danger of divergence. There is the danger of a barely concealed contempt for the workers who do not happen to agree with revolutionary intellectuals. This has been rather noticeable on the new left of the USA or West Germany. There is the danger of establishing a sort of large social and intellectual ghetto in which intellectuals, while claiming to operate within the working class movement, actually address each other, often in terms which are actually incomprehensible to anyone outside. This is not a danger confined to Marxists, but to any literate group sufficiently large to develop esoteric interests and an esoteric jargon, especially when both are reinforced by such institutions as colleges. Poets write poems about the act of writing poems—i.e., addressed to other poets—and if there aren't enough of them, teachers make students read and discuss them, or read critics who discuss them (and who may also be both poets and teachers) in order to pass examinations. Much the same is, unfortunately, true of a lot of marxist philosophers. And in political practice, groups of left wing intellectuals who isolate themselves from the actual political labour movement, on the grounds that it is far too moderate for them, risk the unhappy fate of the post-1968 ultra-left: disillusion, fragmentation and marginalisation. I do not wish to underestimate the genuine if modest successes achieved by certain marxist organisations in the past ten years—and still less, of course, their dynamism and initiative. But by the standards of their own original hopes and their own evaluation of their tasks, they have nevertheless been disappointing.

Intellectuals as a Social Stratum

This brings me to the third aspect of intellectuals in politics today: the movement of intellectuals as a social stratum. Unlike the first two aspects, namely the new role of intellectuals as potential spark-plugs in world politics and their increasing prominence in the socialist and communist movements, or movements bearing such labels, this is not at all obvious. The only obvious facts are that there is today a large and growing mass of people in society who carry out the functions of intellectuals, that almost all of
them have passed through the medium and higher parts of the educational system, and that this system is of increasing size and social significance, since it provides a crucial, and perhaps today the central, mechanism for social differentiation and selects a large, and perhaps in modern state-monopoly capitalist societies the crucial, sector of the superior cadres. But it does not follow that all those who have passed through this educational mill—even those who have passed through the general and non-vocational parts of it—form a single social stratum, though they may well all bear the signs of their common provenance.

In fact, intellectuals are both divided horizontally and stratified vertically; as well as being, in many cases, associated with specific classes. There is, first, a large and growing stratum of people in production who require some sort of systematic academic training to do their jobs instead of or in addition to apprenticeship, training on the job and experience. The growing role of the educational system for socio-professional selection underlines this. This has long been so for the intellectual professions of the bourgeoisie, including those directly linked with production such as engineers, but today many people who would, fifty years ago, have been formed as skilled workers are formed as and become something like subordinate technical intellectuals. There is, second, the even more enormous growth of tertiary occupations of an intellectual kind—for instance in education, communications and the media, various kinds of social service and some parts of the swelling administrative bureaucracy, and the equally expanding fields of planning and research. Part of this could be classified under direct production, given the role of science today, but I am not here concerned with drawing precise demarcation lines. There is, third, the large number of people who have undergone the basic training as intellectuals but can't find employment in them, either because the capitalist machine overproduces intellectuals or because the economic crisis of capitalism does not provide enough jobs for them.

All these are intellectuals of one kind or another, but there is also a stratification among them, and insofar as capitalism finds it increasingly difficult to provide room at the top or promotion, this stratification becomes more noticeable even in nominally open professions. As in the medieval catholic clergy—which of course formed the bulk of the feudal intelligentsia—there is a marked difference between the modern equivalents of parish priests and of bishops and cardinals, between poor friars and monks of opulent monasteries. During such crises as the Reformation and the French Revolution this difference emerged in political and ideological terms. It would be a mistake to underestimate the gap between "high" and "low" intellectuals today. However this is not simply a stratification within a particular class such as the old labour aristocracy, for certain kinds of intellectuals are integrated into or identified with the ruling class in a way in which labour aristocrats were not and could not be. This is due not only to the increasing importance of technocratic training for business, but to the use of meritocracy in providing a legitimation for privilege. As Bourdieu and de Saint Martin note at the conclusion of their analysis of 216 major French firms and their heads in 1972 (Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales Mar-Apl 1978 20/1)

"few dominant groups have ever assembled as many principles of legitimation (notably aristocracy of birth, economic success and meritocracy based on success in school) as the present occupants of the positions of power (in France)." (p.112)

Since becoming an intellectual marks a much sharper separation from manual labour, the link between certain types of intellectuals and workers is less intimate, though there are activities—primary school teaching and perhaps mass circulation journalism in the past, possibly social work today—which are more closely associated with them.

Finally, there are differences between intellectuals in social origin and selection. The elite strata are both largely selected from the established middle class, especially what the Germans call the Bihlungs-bürgertum—those who owe their social position precisely to their parents' accumulation of cultural capital—and also often trained in separate elite institutions. Conversely, the bulk of the first-generation who are the product of the educational expansion since the 1950s tend to come largely, at least the men, from below the established middle class. They are also, on average, much younger, since they have only some twenty years of recruitment to draw upon.

Political Orientation

In spite of this heterogeneity, there is substantial common ground ideologically, politically and culturally between a great many of these intellectual groups, with the major exception of the vocationally trained or technocratic intellectuals who largely identify with the bourgeoisie. But of course they are the ones who do not see themselves or are seen as intellectuals. By tradition most of the rest have always stood left of centre in the developed capitalist countries though there have been some notable exceptions such as Germany. In Britain they used to be Liberal and are now largely a sort of Labour, in America Democrats, in France Republicans. To the extent that in such countries these broad left-of-centre alignments have tended also to include
the working class, at least periodically, a sort of alliance between workers and intellectuals goes back a long way. And it is also a fact that a certain continuum stretches from, say, the ideal Guardian-anguish of West German and more recently Italian revolutionaries; as witness the genuine moral anguish of those who cannot find jobs at the level which, as the folklore of the liberal bourgeoisie held in the private sector of the economy) from among revolutionary or barely ex-revolutionary graduates, namely Mexico.

Necessary Concessions

It is true that the intellectuals thus integrated require certain concessions, but these are in fact the conditions which bourgeois-democratic regimes normally provide for most of their middle classes, and even some non-democratic bourgeois regimes—except at moments of acute crisis—often allow for: some freedom to speak, read and write, to travel, to engage in political and pressure-group activities, or just to grumble in public. Conversely, the demand for and the defence of these conditions binds large sectors of the established intellectual and professional strata to bourgeois-democratic capitalism, however critical they may be of it in other respects. And insofar as they see the threat to these conditions as coming not only from the right but from some parts of the left, their traditional links with the left, both domestically and internationally, may be eroded.

If we were to look for a political platform which unites such intellectuals across the continents and social systems, it would probably today be this: and it would unite them against both the Chilean and the Czechoslovak regimes, the Cambodian as well as the Brazilian, as well as—with varying degrees of hesitation and regret—against some of their own left. I happen to approve of this platform. These demands for freedom and democracy are not confined to intellectuals or relevant to them; and they ought to be an integral part of socialism; and
for all classes. Nevertheless, they are also demands in which the professional middle classes have a specific interest, and are often linked with even more specific concerns of this stratum, such as the question of their children’s education and certain cultural activities which they virtually monopolise. Such demands can be, and often are, granted to an elite, while in practice denied to others. And the intellectual middle classes, or large sections of them, are privileged, though their rewards are not always financial. They have a lot more to lose than their chains.

Politically a lot of them tend to be attracted to some sort of a left, not only because there’s a tradition of liberalism and the general atmosphere of student life since 1960 has been leftish, but also because they are increasingly today employed for salaries, and largely in some way or another by the public sector. They are, as Dahrendorf rightly says, for equality because they are for equal privilege. They would not change their position significantly in a socialist society, so long as it met their conditions. But then, they are not the only ones who don’t relish the prospect of an undemocratic socialism.

On the other hand they—we, for I speak of my own stratum—are remote from actual production and indeed largely parasitic on public subsidies for activities whose actual social utility is difficult to measure. The unestablished sectors of this stratum—the students, the surplus of unemployed intellectuals—are clearly more radical while young or dissatisfied, but paradoxically I would not bet on their commitment to the left being quite so firm. It will remain so only insofar as the mass labour and socialist movement retains its hegemony, and they remain attached to it. It is unfortunately quite easy to envisage many of such radical agitations, though probably not in England which at present pin on a red badge, unpin it and reveal themselves as, say, ultra-nationalists, difficult to distinguish from those which once used to pin on rightwing badges. I hope not.

Summary

Only three things seem fairly clear. First, as I have said, that they are today, to an unusual extent, political initiators and catalysts. Second, that the political future depends on the union of intellectuals and the masses—but also, unfortunately, that there is often a major risk of isolating themselves from, even of antagonising, their necessary allies; if only by expressing their separateness in a separatist jargon. Third, and more positively, that their movement has in the past two decades produced a greater number of Marxist intellectuals than ever before in the west. They will play an important role in the future. And to their tasks I now turn in my final observations.

The Role of Marxist Intellectuals

Marxist intellectuals recognise that they have to combine theory and practice in both their theoretical and practical activities. That is to say as practitioners our strategy and tactics rest on a Marxist analysis of the situation and as theorists our theory is rooted in the study of the concrete reality of society, which cannot be grasped purely in the abstract, but only through human praxis. We are no doubt involved in various ways and different degrees in the labour movement and the class struggle, but we also have a specific function in the socialist and communist movement as intellectuals, namely in the field of Marxist analysis. We are by no means the only ones to have this function and still less can we claim a monopoly of it. And yet there is a certain social division of labour, and whether or not as individuals we are better qualified to do so, as intellectuals we have more time to spend on reading and writing than others, if only because it fits in with our training and jobs. And there was sound political sense in the old party slogan which guided us in the 1930s, namely that the first task of the communist student was to be a good student.

Now our contribution in the field of marxist analysis and theory must today be determined by the fact that we are living not only through an impressive efflorescence, but through a profound crisis of Marxist thinking. This has three practical aspects. First, the marxist analysis of present-day capitalism, however valid in general principle, is in concrete terms largely out-of-date. And there has been much less work in this field than is necessary. Second, our analysis of socialism, never very well developed, has largely broken down. And third, our view of the actual forces which will bring about the transition from capitalism to socialism and the strategy and tactics for doing so, requires very fundamental reconsideration especially in view of the changes in modern capitalist society. These three aspects of the crisis are naturally interconnected.

The point I want to stress is not the need to bring the Marxist analysis up-to-date, which includes deciding what has become obsolete in old and sometimes deeply established doctrines, but the way in which this ought to be done. I don’t want to stress the need for looking again at our analysis, not just because a lot of people recognise it anyway, but also because we all know that, ever since Engels in 1895 explained why the future revolution couldn’t any longer use 1848 as a model, the major communist figures have all revised earlier marxist analysis. It is true that a major obstacle to the development of marxist thinking is still far from extinct, namely the tendency, for which there are historical reasons, to transform it into a rigid set of dogmas and doctrines incorporated in a body of texts untouchable—
except by authority. However, I am happy to think that this obstacle is probably smaller in many Communist parties outside the socialist states than there, or among many Marxist sects and organisations in the capitalist and third worlds.

How to Rethink Marxism

The problem, then, is not whether to rethink marxism but how to. Now there is today an enormous proliferation of writings which, while claiming to be Marxist, throw out the baby with the bathwater—of people who lend Marx's name to some current intellectual fashion or guru, of people who claim to be Marxist but reject Marx' Preface to the Critique of Political Economy or think historical analysis is irrelevant to politics, and so on. I am thinking even more of the enormous growth of marxist metaphysics; of the sort of philosophers, sociologists and economists whose writings neither interpret the world nor help to change it, but are aimed chiefly to produce discussion in seminars of other Marxist philosophers, sociologists and economists. My criticism is naturally not aimed at all current marxist theorising; and I do not wish to deny that much of the writing I criticise is very acute and some is interesting. Nor do I wish to imply—let me say so clearly—that there is only one "correct" interpretation of Marxism, though I think it needs saying that much of what goes under the name of Marxism today would have amazed the old man himself. I simply wish to point out that this sort of abstract Marxist theorising can have serious political consequences. For to divorce marxist theory from the actual concrete social reality and its transformations is to divorce theory from political practice and to leave political practice unguided and arbitrary. It enables people whom Marx and Lenin would have easily recognised as, say, anarcho-syndicalists or narodnik terrorists or even Mazzinian petty-bourgeois nationalists, to pin a sort of marxist badge to their lapels and claim that their practice conforms to their badge. I am sufficient of an old-fashioned marxian Marxist to believe that this divorce between an abstract and metaphysical theory and an arbitrary, often ultravoluntarist, practice is not due just to a wrong interpretation of Marx, but that on the contrary such wrong interpretations are largely due to the social and political isolation of the students and intellectuals among whom they flourish.

The counterpart of this abstraction is a total concentration on what is immediately relevant for agitation. Sometimes both coexist, as among the recent generation of British Marxist historians, some of whom go off at a tangent pursuing Althusserian abstractions while others concentrate on recent labour history; with the incidental result that large sections of British history are left to anti-Marxists—e.g. the English Revolution—and these will in due course write the textbooks for our schools. I believe this search for an immediate "relevance" to be another way of escaping the major task of marxist analysis today. This task is to be found somewhere between the extremes of debating the law of value in general and of writing editorials against the education cuts in the Morning Star, though of course both are necessary. It is to stand back and take a look at the world in historical perspective. This is not an academic exercise, though I don't see why Marxist academics should not live up to their name also.

Over the last 25 years we have been living through the most spectacular transformation of human society; much more far-reaching than the first arrival of industrial capitalism because it has been both deeper and more global. It is the realisation of the tendencies of capitalism noted by Marx and Engels in the Manifesto. We have been living through an era when not merely technology and the productive process have been revolutionised—incidentally in ways which have transformed even the remotest households such as the transistor—but when social structure, human relations, culture, have utterly changed. We are now actually living out old predictions: the disappearance of the peasantry, the transformation of the family, the collapse of ancient religions like Roman Catholicism. And with the end of what, looking back, we must recognise as a transitional phase of capitalist development—transitional because it adapted and embodied the heritage of the precapitalist past it was not yet able to destroy—even the structures of traditional capitalist society are in crisis. And with them our analysis of its eventual overthrow and our strategy, based on that earlier period. This affects the capitalists, because they no longer know what is happening and what to do, as witness the helplessness of their economists and the flight of their ideologists into reaction and, as in recent writings of Daniel Bell, into religion. ("The Return of the Sacred", Bull. Amer.Acad.Arts & Sci. XXXI Mar 1978, 6 pp 29-55). They may be left to their own problems.

Our Responsibility

But we are not much better off. In the midst of this new phase of capitalism, which took us by surprise, and in the midst of a general crisis of capitalism which some of us predicted without really understanding it, we have no clear or agreed perspective at all about how it can lead to a socialist transformation and, to be honest, no real expectation that it will. And this failure is particularly grave in Britain, since ours, the oldest country of developed capitalism, is the one in which the breakdown of capitalism is in many ways the most dramatic, the need for transformation desperately urgent, and the objective conditions for it better than in most.
I would not be writing here if I didn't think Marxism provided a better guide to the solution of the problems of our time than other approaches. But it won't do so unless Marxist intellectuals spend more time than many of us have done in analysing concretely what is happening in the world today and the way it is going, even when we don't think it is going our way. There have been enough failures and disappointments for the left since 1960 to suggest that we are groping in semi-darkness. If we are to change the world, we must know what the conditions of our struggle really are, not what they were or ought to be. If we don't find out and act accordingly we, as Marxist intellectuals, will be symptoms of the world crisis but we won't help to overcome it and to build socialism.