

BRITAIN: PROSPECTS FOR THE SEVENTIES

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IN the late nineteen-fifties, the New Left organized a conference under the title (suggested, I believe, by the late Isaac Deutscher): "Will it be the Red Sixties?" Although one grouping has proclaimed 1970 to be "The Year of Lenin and Trotsky", and although there were undoubtedly more reds in 1969 than there had been in 1959, no-one saw fit to promote a similar discussion about the 'Seventies. Is there no prospect for Socialism in Britain during the next decade?

The first point to make in this discussion is that although the growth of an indigenous socialist movement is the precondition for the weakening of capitalism, leave alone its replacement, in any country, nonetheless no indigenous movement will grow in purely "national" soil, or feed on purely "national" air. There is no such soil, no such air. This lesson should by now be very plain, even within the Labour Party in this country. By 1960, the basic strategy of the Labour Party had been elaborated in a document called "Signposts for the Sixties". It aroused heated discussion, but neither on the right nor the left were the actual trials which destroyed the plausibility of the whole view it represented, even remotely predicted. For the left, the platform was rightly castigated for its failure to appreciate the realities of the *British* power-structure, or to tackle the structural reform of the *British* political economy. For the right, it was vindicated in an appeal to the *British* electoral consensus. But what happened was that the best-laid schemes of British mice and British men alike went once more agley, in the wake of a whole series of *international* events. A few weeks before he was elevated to office, Mr. Wilson was informing the TUC that if we got into pawn to foreign bankers, all hopes of social reform would be ruined, leave alone any possibility of an independent foreign policy. Evidently he did not anticipate the situation which was to emerge when, a few weeks after, in the context of the balance of payments crisis, his team took over Governmental responsibility. Within days, Mr. Greenwood was betraying Cheddi Jagan in Guyana and lending Ascension Island to combined U.S. and Belgian paratroop forces in order to enable them to sort out the Congo. Needless to say, these auguries were followed by further wholesale apostasies, both on the foreign and home fronts. By 1969 the egalitarian sentiments of Labour's revisionists, so fiercely canvassed in the 'fifties, had come to sound utopian in the highest degree, so that to reprint the books of cabinet

ministers today might easily be to incur the charge of subversive and malicious intent. Yet, if we are to assume even rudimentary good faith on the part of these leaders, they clearly had not thought for one moment that they would come to confront, in office, the problems which actually faced them.

The basis of provincial complacency upon which so much "socialist" discussion was laid in these days, has, one hopes, been seriously eroded by the experience of the Labour Governments : but if we are to make any sense at all of the likely immediate future, we must do more than attempt to allow for the impingement of world political forces upon British events, but we must attempt to think within an international framework. This is the real meaning of Deutscher's remarks (which are profound) in the 1969 edition of the Socialist Register.

The first, and most crucial fact which will mark the 'seventies is the continued growth of the disparity between the economic growth of the advanced and the underdeveloped nations. As an American critic has said, these should properly, from the viewpoint of capitalism, be styled "the never-to-be-developed nations". The irreversible movement of the terms of international trade in favour of industrialized, and predominantly capitalist countries, and against primary producing former colonies or quasi-colonies, is a basic condition of existence for modern capitalism. The development of international conglomerate companies, and the push that this will give to new alignments between groups of capitalist nation states, will exacerbate, not ameliorate, this condition. So, on a world scale, there will be more hunger, not less, and more poverty both relatively, in comparison with extremes of wealth elsewhere, and absolutely. This will coexist with a frenetic rat-race in the rich nations, to intensify the rates of obsolescence of more and more peripherally useful expensive consumer goods. Want and waste will face each other out. And so, again, there will be more revolutions. The meaning of this is not by any means a purely moral one. The moral response of young people, throughout the world, to the Vietnamese Revolution, should lead no-one to undervalue the force of human solidarity, once it is awakened. But for Britain, there are numerous regions of the third world which are by no means safely sealed off from the domestic economy. An outbreak of revolution in Malaysia or South Africa could have explosive significance for the British balance of payments, whatever patriotic zeal was displayed in the struggle against trade union greed and inflationary infant schools. In such a case, even if Mr. Jack Jones were safely accommodated in Wormwood Scrubs, and Mr. Syd Harroway, suitably clad in irons, sweltering in the hold of an ironclad on the long voyage to Australia, things would be little better for the Authorities. Indeed, if the liberation movement in Johannesburg were only to blow up a couple of

diamond mines and succeed in subsequently staying out of prison, the markets would wobble a bit. No-one in England can say, today, whether this will happen. No doubt Mr. Wilson has instructed some minion to make careful checks, from time to time, with the representatives of law and order in Pretoria. But troubles in this field come, never in single spies, but always in whole battalions. Every day that the trade balances of the rich powers improve at the expense of conscripted miners and sweated plantation workers, is a day in which the battalions can add new recruits and prepare new positions. The South African people, it should be marked, pursuing this example, cannot socialize the South African economy without at the same time socializing a great lump of what today is called the British economy. And when they do, an indeterminate, but beyond doubt, large, sector of British opinion will remain firmly, indeed, actively, on their side.

The second major area of international politics which will remain fluid is world communism. The Socialist countries have for many years been mainly oriented to the preservation of world peace, which they have in the main identified with the maintenance of the status quo. Mr. Khrushchev appeared to believe that if he could gain time for the Russian economy to develop, he might eventually buy out American capitalism. One need hardly question his estimate of the cupidity of American Capitalists in order to doubt the feasibility of such a proposal. Today's leaders of the Soviet Union may be a bit less "revisionist", but there can be no doubt that their influence in the major capitalist countries is largely exerted in favour of responsible behaviour. But the socialist economies are not doing as well as they need to do, and the reason is fairly plain : that the political structure of more or less paternalist control by a sclerotic monolith is in increasingly sharp conflict, not only with the abstract norms of Socialist Democracy, but also with the healthy performance of the economy itself. Tanks in Czechoslovakia may postpone the day when this conflict is registered in the live politics of the Soviet Union, but they cannot defer it forever. It is inconceivable that we can all live another ten years without more Czechoslovakias. The effect of such events is at first sight paradoxical : the move to democratize communism, vilified by the communist establishment as "rightist", manifestly strengthens the left in the capitalist countries : while the reimposition of "Leninist norms" (which means the reimposition of norms which it is highly uncomplimentary to associate with Lenin) produces an immediate setback for that left. Workers' councils in Prague encouraged the growth of the demand for Workers' Control not only in England, but all over Europe. The result of the Prague Spring was a whole series of thaws in communist parties on the periphery of the world movement, the most notable of which has taken place in Australia. While the original moves

to destalinization produced some important moves to the right in communist parties outside the socialist bloc, as well as some left tendencies; today, in the context of the sharpening of the struggle against imperialism, the new events in Eastern Europe are increasingly radicalizing the West European communists.

In the event of a genuine democratic transformation of Soviet institutions, of course the whole prospect for socialism is transformed. But even short of this, as the moral controls of orthodoxy are steadily undermined by its repressive excesses, so the world communist movement in the capitalist world becomes more and more prone to develop the arguments which are suppressed in its sister parties of the socialist bloc, and the resonance of the voices of the left gains amplitude and authority.

But Socialism will never establish itself as being beyond question in all respects a more humane, freer, more personally liberating form of society than capitalism, until it has seized one or more of the most developed capitalist nations. The most powerful stimulus to a real upsurge of working-class understanding in these countries, without which socialism is not remotely thinkable, will come from the examples which such countries themselves can offer one to another.

What, then, is the likelihood of such an event? Certainly, ten years ago, or even five years ago, most socialists would have answered this question pessimistically, or at any rate with considerable caution. The revolutionary events in France in 1968 have combined to produce much greater optimism, especially among young people, and even more especially among students, who have come to see the role of the student movement as a catalyst to revolutionary action among masses of people. No-one should under-estimate the political weight of students as a militant force, and in these islands it has been powerfully demonstrated in Northern Ireland. The general point that the insular view of British political life is inadequate is reinforced to an extraordinary degree by the growth of the international student movement: the links which all backwoods members of parliament are prepared to discern between Rudi Deutsche, Bernadette Devlin and Tariq Ali provide their own eloquent, if absurd, witness to this fact. Of course, the view that the student revolt is a conspiracy is a convenient assumption for people whose whole experience of politics is confined to the organization of cabals and manoeuvres between cliques: but the real social upheaval which has thrown up the European extra-parliamentary opposition has dramatically put in question the whole apparatus of consensus which has evolved in Western Europe in post-war years, and revealed the equilibrium of capitalism to be unstable in the highest degree. If a comparative handful of student protesters could precipitate a general strike of extraordinary

proportions and intransigence, threatening the very foundations of one of the main pillars of the EEC, it became transparently plain that new social forces, new political possibilities, were emerging.

The consensus which has dominated British political life since before the Economist coined the term "Butskellism" may well serve as an example for what, until recently, dominated also most of the rest of Western Europe. This dualistic, or pluralistic, coalition rested on very temporary economic circumstances. The same forces which have aggravated the polarization between rich and poor nations have also, within welfare capitalism, continually reinforced the relative deprivation of large sectors of the "affluent" populations, while concentrating ever greater power and wealth in the control of ever fewer persons at their summits. That the material standards of even the most depressed people have in many cases increased in absolute terms, and in some cases substantially increased, has not altered the relations between rich and poor in any fundamental sense. The pursuit of economic growth, which is a condition of survival in competitive, allegedly "mixed" economies (which are, of course, entirely capitalist, since in all cases their "public" sectors are subordinated to the needs of their private enterprisers) is an impossible dream in the absence of "incentives" which bring in their tow growing disparities in the distribution of income and wealth. So we see, everywhere, the multiplication of roadhouses in which expense-account diners regularly spend more on a single meal than slum families can give the grocer in a whole week or more. The poor, left to themselves, are not an insurgent force, because their very poverty is a demoralizing experience, invariably accompanied by loss of self-confidence, and general cynicism about all the traditional collectives which have failed to honour their repeated promises to bring amelioration. The militants among working people in every advanced country are invariably among better-paid, more assertive groups of workpeople. But everywhere, also, the former "radical" or "socialist" movements which have moved into the political consensus have vainly pledged themselves to "attack" the problem of poverty by deference to the very circumstances which give rise to it. In Britain, the strategy of Wilsonism was first to seek "growth" and then to share it out fairly among all the people. If all would labour fiercely, Mr. Wilson was entirely at the ready, we were assured, to come among us with the loaves and fishes. The economic miracle has materialized, for the time being: not surprisingly, after swingeing deflation and devaluation had done everything possible to increase the queues of needy people at the Lakeside. But the miracle of redistribution is still awaited, with decreasing confidence, by its once eagerly expectant beneficiaries. The fact is very plain. To get growth within this given structure, all the fishes and most of the loaves must be sent off to the roadhouses, wherein will

gorge the prosperous commercials upon whom growth depends. The best that the welfare state can do is to save the leavings to produce a dribble of fishcakes which can be rationed out by the Ministry of Social Security. The recipients will not take their grudges to the barricades, or not yet, anyway. But neither will they be easily persuaded to take their gratitude to the polls.

If this were the only basic dilemma of capitalism, however, the whole system could be maintained for as long as the moral sense of the populace remained dull, which might be a considerable while. It is not, and we have had spectacular evidence on the matter during the last years. All the competitive impulses which degrade the poorest people in modern capitalism also make their weight felt upon the main body of the apparently "affluent" populace, upon the trade unions which are most powerfully organized among the better-paid work-people, and upon the growingly proletarianized sections of the professions. If the classic contradictions of capitalism have, within the advanced countries, been to some extent sublimated in the post war years, they nonetheless express themselves most cogently in the process of permanent inflation, and in the related urge to establish increasingly marginal competitive leads over adversaries. The evolution of incomes policies and similar neo-capitalist state mechanisms for restricting and controlling the restive labour market, has been the universal reaction to emerge during the decades of comparatively full employment, which has constantly established wage-levels at a point at which they have imperilled the return which capital has felt to be its necessary due. In almost all the major capitalist nations the trade unions are less able today than ever they were, to accept the bridles which are offered to them. The expectations of workers have risen faster than the productive capacity of the economic machine to slake them, and these expectations, "manipulated" or not by advertising media, form a solid barrier of resistance to retrenchment. It is in this area that the major conflicts of the seventies are bound to come, and they are likely to be protracted. In the meantime, in England, it is a sanguine thought that even the schoolteachers have begun to go on strike, thus educating all their wards in the appreciation of how rewards are really distributed, and powerfully eroding whatever taboos may remain in the working population against self-defence and organization.

Battles on incomes policy grow over, very easily, into battles on workers' control. Productivity deals and new management devices of the same kind, sedulously encouraged by state agencies, force every worker to assess the adequacy or otherwise of his trade union powers, and the degree of his control over his job. As a succession of Governments has set about "rationalizing" the industrial relations networks of every European nation, so the defensive trade union reactions have

invariably grown over into aggressive, control demands. And this merely intensifies the need of those in Authority to abridge the argument, to seek to foreclose it. Confrontations will not be indefinitely deferred.

All these forces have been at work in the most notable way in Britain. While the responses of the workpeople remain unstructured, they will achieve no real *political* expression, and in such a context the Labour Movement will remain vulnerable, if powerful. But the yeast is working, and political insights gained anywhere will travel, at the speed of rediffusion, everywhere.

It might, indeed, be the red 'seventies.