

## BRITAIN: PROSPECTS FOR THE SEVENTIES

(ii) Nigel Harris

PREDICTION without power to influence events is not much more than idle guessing. Theory and practice diverge in opposite directions. And like all individual guesses, subjective wishes and prejudices tug at our sleeve, taking us far from what might seem obvious to a significant political force in society trying to appraise the future. We have to steer between the Left's penchant for immanent slump and the Right's assumption that all is really normal under the surface. This account is concerned to suggest some of the important conjunctures in the coming years, with the background concern of creating just such a force to begin to influence events, rather than leaving us as creatures of circumstance. The account is no more than a *résumé* of some of the "theses" current in International Socialism, with little claim to originality or analysis in depth.<sup>1</sup> In most cases, the factual support is omitted lest the account plough into a book. Again, the account is restricted deliberately to Britain, despite the obvious fact that Britain is more a function of the world economy than master of its own independent fate. Some of the main determinants of Britain lie abroad, and these have received extensive treatment **elsewhere.**<sup>2</sup>

An important assumption in this account is that the battle for socialism is not fought out simply in terms of abstractions, ideals or "politics", but rather more, in terms of concrete issues and details in hundreds of factories, mines and offices up and down the country. The dividing line between "sixpence an hour more" and "workers' control" is not some great abyss separating the selfish and the unselfish. Some aggressively middle class socialists have called the current class struggle "belly socialism"; the term is a comment on the speaker rather than what he describes, on the disguised snobbery of those with an income sufficiently high to enable them to commune with the eternal verities. It is assumed in this account that no-one ever was or should be "unselfish" in the sense implied, that the distinction in this form is invalid. If men are rational, then the ideal, to be politically significant, has to follow organically from what they see as their material interests. Unless this happens, socialism is merely the plaything of utopians.

How far then do coming events suggest that socialism will come to embody popular wishes?

## I

The twentieth century transformation of capitalism can be described in a number of different ways. One element in the change is the decisive shift from an economy based upon the extractive industries or industries engaged in relatively primitive processing of raw materials to one based upon highly sophisticated manufacture or processing of goods, from an extensive exploitation of raw materials to a more and more intensive exploitation of basic inputs. At the risk of gross oversimplification, some of the implications or associated changes in this shift can be summarized as follows:

1. The concentration of capital—already clearly perceived by Marxists before the first World War—has been enormously accelerated, at the same time as capital itself has grown. Production in the most important fields has been further concentrated in a few very large companies, and new industries have a much briefer phase of "open market" production before becoming highly concentrated. Given that the largest companies make the largest investment in research (apart from the State) innovations tend to be bunched within existing companies rather than being the basis for new independent companies and industries. In turn, within the largest companies, power has tended to concentrate in a small and shrinking number of the largest owners of capital and professional managers.

2. External threats—in particular, the interwar slump and the second World War—along with the need of the largest enterprises to plan their operations far in advance, have made a relatively autarchic planning State vital for productive operations. In the postwar period, the State has also shouldered the burden of uneconomic basic industries and organized one of the more profitable and dynamic sectors of production, the arms sector.<sup>9</sup> Today, despite flamboyant claims, private capitalism cannot survive without State capitalism.

3. The labour force has equally been transformed to meet the needs of the new kind of capitalism. Intensive exploitation of inputs has demanded increasing skills from labour, and increasing productivity. The first is the background to the dramatic expansion in educational services, the second to the expansion in welfare services and increasing real wage earnings. The skill level—measured in terms of pre-employment training—has steadily risen, producing a slow decline in the proportion of the labour force which is unskilled manual, and an expansion in the white collar sections. The same shift has produced a redistribution between productive employment and services. One of the numerous results of this change is the relative decline in the status of white collar employment.

4. The type of production process and market characteristics of

modern capitalism, along with the progressive reduction in transport costs, makes capital relatively "footloose".<sup>4</sup> Production is tending to locate itself near to the largest markets, rather than near raw material sources. Thus, in terms of European geography, industry is tending to concentrate activities in areas which are already industrially the most advanced—in particular, in the triangle between London, Paris and Frankfurt. The peripheral areas, as a result, relatively decline. Despite very considerable efforts by different European governments to divert resources into backward regions, whether to develop underdeveloped areas (as for example, South Italy) or revive formerly industrialized areas (the North-East, Northern Ireland), the *relative* impoverishment of such areas continues.<sup>5</sup>

5. Finally, the technological dynamism of the manufacturing sector (powerfully pushed by the ingenuity of the arms sector) during the long contemporary phase of economic growth has transformed the raw materials situation. Increasingly, capitalism is able to manufacture its own raw materials. One result of this change is the transformed relationship between advanced capitalism and the backward countries. In the last great growth period, roughly between 1880 and 1914, the forward drive of the metropolitan countries swept into its wake numerous backward countries, suppliers of essential raw materials for the voracious appetite of extensive capitalism. In the second phase, 1948-1970, the patterns of world trade and capital movements have shifted *away* from the exchange between advanced and backward, and towards the exchange between the segments of intensive capitalism. The division of labour forced upon the world by imperialism appears to have been abandoned. The disastrous implications of this change of emphasis are not the concern of this *account*,<sup>6</sup> although the need to make the change from trade with the backward, the Empire, to trade with the advanced (the European Common Market and the United States), underlies many of the problems faced by British capitalism.

The synopsis of some of the changes within capitalism is wildly telescoped, but it does permit us to detect some of the processes which are still working themselves out. First, the flexibility of the system, in terms of the combinations of factors required to maintain a given output, appears to be increasing. There are few, if any, indispensable factors of production, raw materials or labour. No area producing a particular raw material can thus rely indefinitely upon its indispensability to the production process. And no specialized group within the labour force can rely upon an irreplaceable contribution to production to guarantee its position. The increasing rapidity of technical change within the system threatens each and every group in turn with redundancy, and the scale of production can make such groups very large.

Of course, these generalizations need to be qualified in practice, and particular sectors are subject to more rapid innovation than others. But even those protected from the effects of innovation for long periods can find themselves, without warning, threatened. A significant section of the white collar class, for example, is already threatened by the advance of new techniques of handling data, and, in particular, by the computer.

Second, the size and scale of companies has exploded beyond the petty boundaries of the nation-State. Within modern intensive capitalism, control of the advance of technology is a much more important factor in determining the future of a company than in the past. The concentration of technological advance is more extreme than the concentration of production itself, and it is the international company which monopolizes important segments of the most important technologies (the national State tends to control the other sectors of technology, particularly through its interest in the arms industry). The postwar world has thus seen the creation of a separate international stratum of power which conflicts with and threatens the power of each and every national State. International companies, by reason of their diversified sources of production, are beyond even the most extreme measures of control available to the national State. For nationalization only cuts the local head of the hydra. The rise of the international companies—sometimes erroneously distorted through the nationalistic prism of "American domination"—simultaneously internationalizes capitalism and threatens the entrenched position of each national ruling class.

## II

The changes in capital are only half the equation. The old capitalism generated a labour movement, shaped by the interests of the old labour force. It was the triumph of the old working class in fighting exploitation to create an enormous trade union movement and a major political party. Yet these achievements have been far outdistanced by the phenomenal growth of the world economy in the post-war period. Old soldiers did not die, they merely faded. Men forgot the priorities which had determined the creation of the organizations of labour. The institutions remained, but often snared in those forgotten priorities. When the concrete "reforms" of higher wages, generated by the growth in a labour scarce boom economy, rolled in week by week, workers seemed no longer to need organs of collective power, whether industrial or political. When the perspective was one of apparently unlimited improvement, then the use of means other than the localized unofficial strike to extract concessions from the ruling class appeared redundant.'

Indeed, so decentralized did the system seem, even the existence of a ruling class seemed questionable.

Appearances were deceptive. For although the confident militancy of advanced groups of workers in a few important industries needed few outside organizational aids—although they needed powerful shop floor organization and the organization provided by the trade union district—to win steady improvement, their power depended upon steady economic growth, upon buoyant profit margins and prices "flexible" enough to make the consumer bear the price of increasing labour costs. It also concealed the fact that the mass of other workers, outside these industries, continued to rely upon mass trade unions to lever up their pay to the scales achieved by the advanced minority, and, indeed, in some cases, even to achieve elementary rights of organization (in 1969, there was an increase in the number of strikes over trade union recognition, for example). But, in wages, the advanced workers set the pace, and their forward push was essential for the increases then achieved by the rest. Wage drift established the criteria for the increase in wage rates. The trade unions seemed to have become the dog the tail wagged. The leap-frogging between advanced "unofficial" groups of workers and the national trade union leadership seemed to have made progress inevitable, requiring little positive intervention by the rank-and-file. But without the advanced workers, the power left to the trade unions in the event of a major challenge to the working class was an unknown quantity. So far as the political arm of the labour movement, the Labour party, was concerned, erosion was more apparent than conservation of popular strength. It was not Gaitskell's wish which determined the course of Rightward drift in the 'fifties, but inexorably slackening popular interest. The life blood of a popular movement seeped silently away, leaving the party as no more than an electoral machine, manipulated from the House of Commons. Even Wilson's brief bid for the lower middle class vote—the "man in the white coat"—in 1964 did not last, let alone recreate the social basis of the party.

Appearances were doubly deceptive. For with the unchallenged monopoly of the political stage, the middle classes led a comeback. The brittle balance of power, temporarily adjusted to favour more worker interests by the controls of World War II and the ensuing Labour government, tipped the other way. The "Welfare State" which was so important a feature of the ideology of the 'fifties slowly faded. The course of private health schemes, of private education, of private pensions, of private housing, the many ad *hoc* decisions of successive governments in response to the lobbies of private interests, illustrated the erosion of the public welfare domain, its substitution by a much more discriminatory private domain, and the resulting increasing

differentials within society.<sup>8</sup> Inflation dragged into the taxable capacity successive strata of the working class. The welfare provisions of the Coalition and Labour Governments were designed to assist capitalism in slump; in boom, the provisions were no longer needed, could be more "selective". Thus, while the strength of workers on one front—in a boom economy—ensured their advance, their weakness on the other, robbed them. While their self-dependence, embodied in the unofficial strike, affirmed again their strength and independence of society; the lack of collective organization meant the Left hand gained what the Right hand lost. More concretely, the mass advanced, leaving pockets of increasing relative poverty among those with no power, those on pensions. The confidence and aggressiveness of fighting workers concealed the fact that, in a crisis, they needed large scale collective organization more than local power to win.

But organization was, itself, only part of the malaise. The monuments of the labour movement stand about us, impressive but of doubtful strength without the mass of the workers. The political consciousness which they embodied, shrivelled in advance of the institutions. Individuals and small groups in strategic industrial positions often found solutions for their problems without having to invoke the collective solidarity or the strategy of which the unions were the supposed instruments. But the rhetoric remained among the dwindling political militants, the heroic postures of the past; the unread prologue or radical clauses of trade union constitutions remained on the record. Like the Labour Party's clause IV, such documents were mainly of historical interest except on occasions when they might function as flags to rally an opposition on issues other than the specific terms of the documents. For the political militants, much of the meaning of the war had been forgotten, even though fragments of the army continued to carry out manoeuvres, the purpose of which was clear neither to the soldiers nor to the onlookers. Nationalization had been separated from workers' power long before, and yet, without workers' power, nationalization remained a substitute for it in the minds of the militants. Somehow or other, merely the extension of the power of the State would supply a replacement for the missing factor, a political working class. In both Social Democracy and Communism, the power of the State became a synonym for "socialism".

### III

It was in this context—a "vacuum on the Left"<sup>9</sup>—that the rulers of Britain were driven to undertake a "modernization" of British capitalism. Whatever the reasons for the sluggish growth of the British economy—and they are of a complexity well beyond the simple

moralisms of the aggressive middle classes—they posed a muted threat to the survival of the British ruling class in the world. Britain's declining share of world trade during a period of unprecedented growth in the world economy was due, it was said, to an imbalance in the distribution of national product between consumption and investment. Put at its simplest, the workers were supposed to be increasing their incomes too fast, thus pushing employers (who are, after all, only a passive element in the production process) to increase prices, so generating inflation and thereby robbing British industry of its ability to compete in export markets. From 1957, successive Governments set about trying to control the rate of increase in global wages, without bothering too much about the advance of the most advanced sectors. The mechanisms were orthodox economic means—periodic deflation to cut consumption—and a propaganda barrage, and manipulation of the elements of working class consumption outside the wage bargain (viz. welfare provisions, housing, taxation etc.). Implicitly, then as now, the aim was less to share the available income equally, even within the working class itself, but rather to lower working class global income at the same time as increasing differentials between the best and worst paid. However, the successive attempts to influence wages directly—from the Cohen Commission, the "Three Wise Men", the National Incomes Commission, through to the Labour leadership's assiduously fostered campaign to prove that Britain faced immanent cataclysm—seem to have had only marginal effects on the global advance of wages. Or rather, what effects there have been, have been temporary and insufficient.

The attempt itself was a dangerous one, a gamble. In intervening so forcefully in the economy in the interests of the Confederation of British Industry, in abandoning its claimed role of neutral arbiter between the interests of capital and labour, the Government risked creating a united opposition, a reunified and necessarily political working class. Labour crowned the change with its open embrace of capitalism, or rather the largest enterprises. A more subtle mechanism was needed, one more decentralized so that labour would not accuse Labour of betraying even the most basic trade union ends. The productivity bargain was the *deus ex machina*. Particular to one company or even one plant, bargained line by line in secrecy between management and trade union representatives, offering in the short term dramatic pay increases for a generalized purge of the labour force, speed up, and the unrestricted right of management to transfer workers between jobs at will, it seemed to be the ideal means to achieve the "flexibility" increasingly needed by enterprises, to cut back wage increases, and to appeal to the fragmented consciousness of the mass of workers. Trade union leaders also found the prospects of winning

substantial pay increases—even if those increases were bought at the right of any more increases for several years while production bounded ahead—attractive. If the right to strike could also be sold, as was proposed in the Ford dispute (February, 1969), even the wings of the most advanced sections of workers could be clipped.<sup>10</sup>

However, the productivity deal is itself fragmentary, and the State cannot be sure that one group of employers will not sell the pass if their profits are high. Of course, to control prices—if it could be done effectively—would stiffen the backbone of weaker employers. But that would be to enter a whole new field of controls, alienating some of the most powerful in the land and bring the State into role of auditor for each firm's accounts. It would mean "opening the books", at least to the Prices and Incomes Board. So some other means is still needed to ensure central vetting of wage agreements, and although the incomes policy is now in ruins, some new "dynamic" substitute will have to be found after the General Election. The State will thus have to retain means to regulate the bargains made in order to enforce the principle that for workers to maintain consumption in the face of inflation must be the result of more than proportionate concessions in terms of output and worker effort. As a secondary factor, a sop to the middle class galleries who always need a scapegoat, the trade unions must be "reformed": that is, placed in a position where they control their members rather than represent them, and can thus cut the rate of unofficial strikes. Of course, the working class in its entirety is "unofficial".

#### IV

Thus, in the years ahead, this "walking on three legs" as the Chinese might call it—incomes policy, productivity bargain, using the unions as ancillary arm of government and management—seems likely to provide the nucleus of issues at stake in the class struggle. For the central problem, despite short term euphoria, seems to remain intractable. The rate of growth of world trade in 1969 promises to have been the highest ever (something over 15 per cent), and yet the British economy made only a modest surplus on its balance of trade in these extremely promising circumstances (the value of British exports increased about 12 per cent). An export offensive and a recession in the United States, a rebound by the Common Market countries, and a generally slower rate of growth of world trade, could restore the deficit in all its old glory. And even if the deficit itself is avoided, the payments position remains sufficiently precarious to compel the State to sustain its long efforts to beat back the wage tide.

Yet the offensive by the State, supported with differing degrees of warmth by the employers depending upon their proximity to the front

and the pressures upon their profit margins, is breaking upon a working class at its most vulnerable. The official institutions only in very few cases provide even minimum services to workers to defend themselves, to break out of the isolation forced upon an individual factory or district. The union leadership is a halfway house between workers and State, and trusted by neither. Yet it cannot allow itself to be too closely attached to the State, or it will lose any worker support, and will then have no credible power with which to bargain. Nor can it come too close to the workers, or it will be outlawed, denied access to the privileges and purtenances of an Estate of the Realm. So it is loved by none. The State is suspicious lest it is betrayed by union leaders, lest they actually begin to lead a revolt. The workers know that, by and large, the unions stifle disputes lest worker power overwhelm union power; the figures for unofficial strikes add credibility to their suspicions.

Nevertheless, the present challenges have produced some small results. Some Leftwingers have come to office in important unions. They do not aim, at least not in concrete terms, to revolutionize the relationship between union member and leader, for their position within the union depends upon the same sort of forces as the preceding leadership. Left or not, they are prisoners of their inheritance, isolated from the only alternative source of power to that of factional vote machines, the silent mass of members. They are able in crucial issues to change the balance of forces, but in the longer term, they are as weak as their popular base. Some of them even see a saviour in productivity bargains, a wage increase without a strike, whatever the cost to their members. Changing the captain on the bridge of the old ships is not however a substitute for rediscovering the crew.

So far as the crew is concerned, the picture is very mixed. The dykes of the incomes policy "norm" have been triumphantly burst, and burst in many cases by a whole range of relative newcomers to the scene: seamen, dustmen, agricultural workers, nurses, policemen, local government officers. In these situations, the vital role of the unions was quite clearly reaffirmed. In 1969, the amount of days lost (roughly 69 million) as a result of strikes was the highest since 1957 (roughly 89 million), and these two years had the highest score since 1932 ( $6\frac{1}{2}$  million). The immediate prospect suggests that the figures will rise year by year, assisted this year by the prospect of a General Election and the Government's desire to please everyone. The only final check on the pace is the "stop" clause of "stop-go", and rising unemployment. But the forms of stable organization to give sinews to the rise in days lost through strikes, and the political consciousness which underpins any such organization, is still very weak. Shop steward committees combine and district committees, still only cover, where they exist at all,

the most advanced sections of workers. The lack of organization corresponds to the lack of an alternative political perspective on events. Militants must live from hand to mouth, both in terms of organization and in terms of alternative ideas.

In particular disputes, even relatively inexperienced workers create with amazing speed the appropriate fighting organizations. The Hackney dustmen spread the virus of strike committees with great speed throughout London and beyond, once they set the issue going. But things have already reached extremity when the dispute begins, and the trajectory of a movement which begins thus is relatively accidental. The movement is blind, reacting to events rather than seeking, in dispute and out, to follow a coherent strategy. The blindness is that of collective disunity, of the lack of coherent and systematic opposition to what is a coherent and systematic attack. In the mind of each worker, the battle is being fought out between the demands of a spurious "national interest" and of desperation. Desperation is weak. And the militants are accordingly weak, without the fortifications supplied by a coherent answer to the nature of the crisis.

But it is not true that there have been no political replies at all. The Labour government has certainly been fertile in breeding boredom, cynicism, not just with its own devious propaganda, but with the system of parliamentary government itself. Negative this may be, but it does indeed make possible an alternative position. The same paradoxical result follows from the Communist Party's energetic attempts to secure the positions recently vacated by the Labour Party. The attempts certainly disorient Communist industrial militants, still the best network of industrial underground in this country, but it also makes it possible for them to begin to break out into independent political action. The two one-day political general strikes against trade union laws in 1969, modest though they were, showed some of the countertrends. In this case, independent action compelled the Communist Party to come in and take control. Of course, these may be funeral rather than birth rites, heralds of winter rather than spring. The dockers' one day strike, overtly political, in favour of Enoch Powell's racialism would be evidence for the winter thesis.

But to draw conclusions from either incidents would be equally wrong. For both represent political reactions to insoluble dilemmas, and both are tiny reflections of disturbances in the ideological vacuum within the working class. Which way these disturbances lead turns very much on how far conscious socialists are prepared to work, argue and persuade. Those socialists who can only see the illusory peaks of heroic endeavour, always usefully faraway in distant lands, but see nothing before their feet, earn their irrelevance, but at enormous cost to the movement here.

At the beginning of this account, it was suggested that the pattern of capitalist concentration simultaneously increased the gap between the central and peripheral areas, and the gap between the central and peripheral sectors of the working class. Thus, cutting across the struggle of the most advanced workers, heavily concentrated in parts of engineering, for example, to assert their power independent of unions and State, are other currents. Regional revolt is likely to further increase in the future. The regional frustrations embodied in the Belgian General Strike (1960-1961) provide one kind of example of the results, Northern Ireland another. The Welsh nationalist forces, like the Scottish, are still weak, and generally snared in the obsession with Parliament. Behind them are likely to develop much more forceful groups if concentration trends continue at the same pace as in the past decade.

Just as, with the first hint of crisis in the air, the apparently dead issue of national self-determination for the oppressed nations of Britain once more appears, so also other issues, thought for long to be only part of the past, are reappearing. The issue of female equality has already appeared, not so much as "the problem of graduate wives" as the pay differentials of Ford seamstresses. The deterioration of white collar employment, the threat of redundancy, adds the further tension of a contradiction between assumed and actual status. For teachers, the effects of income differentiation as a result of capital concentration and the Government's incomes policy are intensified by the tensions of status, and, for women, by relative discrimination. For some nurses, all these issues are similarly present, plus racial discrimination as well. Where the logic of the system exacerbates a whole complex range of frustrations, the results could be explosive. Coloured workers in backward industries suffer the effects of several processes, so that anti-racialism, like feminism, is inextricably interwoven with the struggle to improve basic material conditions.

Out of the clash of generations and the exploitation of youth as workers and passive consumers, has leapt a whole luxuriant garden of oppositional flowers. New issues bounce into the foreground with a rapidity which suggests diverse frustrations if not a coherent platform. Again, the ideological vacuum of society offers no support to those young people, like many students, in doubt, and the demand for skilled University labour is no longer a demand for leisured liberal gentlemen, but for ideologists and ad men. Like the teachers, several lines cross at the same point, exaggerating the flux. And the flux is real enough—the drug scene, the crime rate, the pop sounds, the mental health rate, the drop out rate, suggest movement of some kind—but of doubtful political significance. In the absence of a coherent alternative, individual solutions are the substitute for collective ones.

## V

This account has tried to locate some of the flash points for working class action in the coming decade, placing these points within a rudimentary picture of the evolution of contemporary capitalism. It has been assumed that world trade will not accelerate its rate of growth to the point where there is room in the system for all the strongest demands to be met, and that the British economy will remain relatively weak. Relative stagnation—the logic of Stop-Go so triumphantly rediscovered by the Labour Government to compensate for its failure to tame the workers—compels the ruling class to continue the strategy evolved during the sixties. To do so, increases pressure simultaneously on the advanced sectors of workers—who have the power to take effective sanctions against the system—and to an even greater extent, on the mass of other workers. Where these issues coincide with the lines of regionalism, race and sex, of the contradiction between the old and new class structures, politics can emerge directly out of the wage struggle. But it is not simply a question of these factors. For in conditions of ideological instability, example and the spread of political ideas can play a vital role. In the first case, we are still seeing the effects of last year's dustmen's strike ripple out through the labour movement, persuading other less militant groups that, although the sanctions may be weak, they should be used. In the case of the second, the political adventurousness of young people, both students and young workers, could have important effects on the industrial struggle.

But political adventurousness, like a revolt which is without clear specific aims and coherent organization, is not only weak in the long haul, it can actually assist what it fights. In the anarchist milieu of many young people today, targets are often most imperfectly identified, and accordingly, the criteria of victory or defeat blurred. As a result, people can be defeated without knowing it, clinging to a rhetoric that itself becomes a form of false consciousness. The audacity and bravery of many young people is thus betrayed by the failure to persist: to ask clearly what is to be done, who is to do it and how?

In a similar way, this lack of clarity could, in the future, be the basis for reaction. For example: the growth of international capitalism has led the more backward sectors of national capital in European countries to begin to raise questions about, not international companies, but "US domination". The positive plank in such questions is the demand by national capital to be left alone to exploit its own population in peace-economic autarchy. Ironically, some of the Left, given the blur, might find such a programme attractive, for anti-Americanism is still a substitute for clear thought for some socialists. The legacy of the Soviet-US contest for global hegemony has left many

socialists feeling that somehow the Americans are nastier than other people.

Thus, ex-Communist--or vaguely Left—hostility towards the United States (and the Government is imperfectly distinguished from the governed), the Chinese tendency to see America as the enemy par *excellence* (rather than world capitalism as a system), finds a common base with the growing radical Right. In Britain, the mixture topped up with the ginger of Powellite racialism, could be a potent one for the revival of a National Socialism. As with the detachment of nationalization from workers' power, the substance and the symbol have been separated. National independence after a socialist revolution is not the same as national independence negotiated by the ruling class for its own purposes. The rights of national self-determination for British capitalism, for one of the arch oppressors, is a slogan to muddle the unwary. The real enemy remains international *and* national capital, whatever their internal disagreements. And the alternative to the present situation is not a shabby national capitalist autarchy, but international workers' power. All the difficulties of the Left in failing to appraise critically its own past, the Russian experience and that of Social Democracy, rise up again to weaken the new beginnings, as if there had been no history at all.

The new beginnings are still small. And the new has still to come to terms with the old, not simply rejecting it nor just accepting it. Our theoretical heritage has to be reconstructed, free from the empty formulae that are the flotsam on the Left's history. But the reconstruction cannot take place in isolation from the same struggle which originally gave birth to the old labour movement. The great defect of revolutionaries who have been isolated for years is their tendency to make a virtue of necessity. Isolated theorization becomes an end in itself, whatever the irrelevance of that activity for the actual class struggle. To forget that the duty of a revolutionary is to raise theory to the level of practice, to dovetail the two in a working relationship, is a recipe for false consciousness, for substituting parlour rhetoric for class strategy. We all suffer from the effects of isolation, but now for the first time, there are possibilities of overcoming it.

But overcoming isolation in isolation is almost impossible. Without being already active, already related to some collective, the possibilities of action seem non-existent. Nobody knows what is to be done until they start trying to do it. The new revolutionaries, unlike the old, are numerous enough to constitute in certain areas a milieu, a mileau that at least in the short term provides some feeling of being active, if not politically significant, let alone located in the working class rather than on the margins of society. The forms of struggle within the working class are fragmented, simultaneously demanding of the activist both

the simplest duties—turning the duplicator handle—and the most complex—defining a strategy. There are no easy avenues into such struggles, even though the contribution of outsiders can be vital. Unifying the socialists and the working class is also the process of building a common organization and developing a common body of theory. It is the same task, the task of building a revolutionary party where a network of political militants in industry and throughout society meet together to define the way forward, the theory to be tested.

And there is not so much time left to create such an organization, nor many people to do it. The attack is on, and unless a coherent organization is created to resist it, the defeats and the counter-attractions of the Right will grow. At the moment, the Left is as fragmented as the working class. It is up to the Left to make itself relevant, to rethink its priorities in order to learn and to unite on urgent immediate tasks, despite political disagreements. A credible organization can decisively change the terms of the current debate. All the theorizing, framing of programmes and raising of slogans, is so much hot air while this basic weakness exists. The new Left's vague rejection of organization as intrinsically evil is thus its own emasculation. It makes itself the gadfly of society, pricking it but never able to influence its direction. Without a common organization, we are all robbed of credibility, colliding in the free market competition for minds. And Powell, from the commanding heights, can rub our noses in our irrelevance with one speech.

#### NOTES

1. These ideas have been explored in the journal, *International Socialism*, and its sister weekly, *Socialist Worker*, in the booklet by T. Cliff and C. Barker, *Incomes Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards*, London, 1966, and perspectives documents prepared for the 1970 annual conference of International Socialism, two of which are to be published in *International Socialism* 42, February, 1970. Much of this material will be summarized in a volume due to appear in 1970 as *A Left Alternative*, edited by John Palmer (Hutchinsons).
2. Cf. Michael Kidron, *Western Capitalism Since the War* (revised edition), April, 1970; and Chris Harman, "Perspectives on the Eastern Bloc", and Nigel Harris, "Perspectives on the Backward Countries", both *IS* 42 *ibid*; Tony Cliff, "Perspectives on the Metropolitan Countries", document for the 1970 IS annual conference.
3. On the implications of a "permanent arms economy", cf. Kidron *ibid.*, chapters 3 and 8, and "A Permanent Arms Economy", *IS* 28, spring 1967.
4. Cf. Kidron, *Western Capitalism*, *op. cit.*
5. *Ibid.*, 8.
6. Harris, *op. cit.*
7. Cf. Cliff and Barker *op. cit.*, and Barker, Colin, "Britain: The Wages Struggle", *IS* 16 and "Current Experience in the British Labour Movement", *IS* 28, spring 1967.

8. Cf. Kincaid, Jim, "Welfare . . . Means . . . and Ends", IS 31, winter 1967-8, and "Social Policy under Labour", in A *Left Alternative*, *op. cit.*; Harris, N., "The Decline of Welfare", IS 7, winter 1961.
9. The phrase is taken from the IS Perspectives document for the 1969 Annual Conference.
10. The implications of productivity bargaining are explored in detail in a forthcoming book by Tony Cliff, *The Employers' Offensive: Productivity Deals and How to Fight Them*, February, 1970 (Pluto Press).