

VIETNAM AND WESTERN SOCIALISM

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I

WHATEVER its outcome may be, the war in Vietnam will have served, better than any other episode in the post-war years, to underline the deep moral and political crisis in which Western socialism is steeped. particularly in countries like Britain, France or Italy, which have large, well organized, even powerful Labour movements. For Vietnam has posed to these movements a challenge as great and compelling as any since the War; while their response to that challenge has been grievously inadequate, or worse. What has occurred, in different degrees, is a generalized default so great as to force attention on issues and problems which, for socialists, go well beyond Vietnam, and which call into question the very character and purpose of these movements. Both the extent of their default, and its underlying causes, have brought into sharp and immediate focus nothing less than the whole present condition of Western labour movements, which obviously also means the present condition and prospects of Western socialism, in all its major denominations. A much more open and thorough discussion of that condition than has hitherto occurred should be of urgent concern to socialists. The present article is intended as a contribution to that discussion.

The first requirement is to locate the nature of the default. This arises from the circumstances and character of the war itself. There is to begin with the fact, brought home every day by the constant stream of news and images from Vietnam, that the United States has over what is now a period of years been engaged there in the wholesale slaughter of men, women and children, the maiming of many more, the obliteration of numberless villages and the forcible transplantation of whole populations into virtual concentration camps, the use of gas and chemical warfare, the devastation of large areas of cultivation, and much, much else which forms part of a catalogue of horrors which has by now been abundantly, sickeningly documented.

Secondly, there is the fact that the United States has done all this in the name of an enormous lie, the lie that it was helping South Vietnam to defend itself against aggression from the North. For the central and most important feature of the whole war is that it has, from the beginning, been waged by a South Vietnamese resistance movement

against a succession of gangster régimes which have owed their survival solely to massive American economic and military support: that this resistance movement is as deeply rooted, as woven into the life of South Vietnam as any liberation movement has been anywhere in this century; that the support which it received for many years from North Vietnam was insignificant, and that the later military involvement of North Vietnam in the war has been and remains of secondary importance.⁸ Even opponents of the war have sometimes appeared to accept the notion that North Vietnam **was** the main protagonist of the war, and have therefore been driven to argue that the United States had in any case no right to intervene in what was essentially a Vietnamese civil war. Such arguments are not required. A civil war has indeed been going on, but it owes its origins and development, not to North Vietnam, but to the utterly loathsome character, now generally acknowledged, of the régime installed and maintained by the United States in South Vietnam after the conclusion of the Geneva agreements in 1954.

Thirdly, it is only in American propaganda that either the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front or North Vietnam have been bent on the immediate reunification of the country under the **rule** of the Hanoi régime. Both have made it repeatedly clear that they wished to see South Vietnam remain an independent and neutral state, with close relations with the North, but with reunification a necessarily long-term prospect. Nor even has the issue been the installation in South Vietnam of a régime identical to that of the North. A National Liberation Front **régime** would obviously and rightly have strong Communist representation; but there is much about the character of the Front, and about the resistance movement as a whole, to suggest that it would not foster an exclusively Communist government—though it should be added that even such a government, after the long years of war, would have a popular basis infinitely broader than the kind of régime which has misruled South Vietnam under American sponsorship ever since 1954, and which remains, whatever the "constitutional" trappings invented for it, the only alternative to the National Liberation Front. The only real issue in South Vietnam has always been the determination of the United States to prevent the establishment there of a strongly left-wing **régime** which would carry through fundamental economic and social reforms, and which would not be susceptible to American control or influence. It is no part of the duty of socialists to claim, despite the unequivocal support to which the resistance movement is entitled from them, that the National Liberation Front would usher in a **régime** of perfect sweetness and light in South Vietnam. But it is part of their duty to point out that there is no other political force which remotely begins to offer to the

people of South Vietnam the chance to establish the conditions for their national and social emancipation.

However, Vietnam has also acquired a significance which far transcends the immediate conflict itself, and which has caused it to **become** a major milestone in contemporary international politics. For the United States government, that wider significance has been claimed to lie in the consequences which a "Vietcong" victory in South Vietnam would have in the rest of South East Asia and in other parts of the Third World. Such a victory, the familiar argument runs, would encourage further "aggression", cleverly disguised as wars of national liberation.

But this "domino theory" is political and sociological nonsense, conjured up and even possibly believed in by men who cannot accept the simple fact that wars of national liberation can be neither engineered nor sustained from outside, but depend utterly on the popular support they are able to obtain; and that revolutionary movements, in the Third World or elsewhere, have their own internal causes, rhythm and dynamic, and can be neither paralysed nor set on the road to success by what happens anywhere else. The installation in Saigon of a government dominated by the National Liberation Front would no doubt be a matter of great rejoicing for many people in many countries; and it would no doubt confirm what has in any case already been demonstrated in Vietnam, namely that overwhelming military power cannot subdue a genuinely popular revolutionary movement. But it would not materially help such movements in countries where they exist, or even bring them into being on a serious basis when they do not. India will not enter the path of revolution because of what happens in South Vietnam; it will do so because of the nature and intractability of its own internal problems and tensions; and the same is true everywhere else.

The real significance of a National Liberation Front victory would lie much less in its impact upon revolutionary movements elsewhere than on its likely impact in the *United States*. Such a victory would obviously constitute a major setback to all the forces inside America which are bent on the continuation of an activist policy of military intervention wherever in the world the *status quo* may be, or may be claimed to be, threatened. Even now, the failure of the United States to impose it will on the Vietnamese resistance movement, despite an **enormous** deployment of power and overwhelming military superiority, has already forced inside America a more searching debate on its role in the world (and on the kind of society which can tolerate the crimes which its government perpetrates) than at any time since the end of World War II, when American foreign policies came to be frozen in a solid Metternichian mould. A settlement which gave to the National

Liberation Front its rightful place in the future government of South Vietnam would demonstrate further and more dramatically the powerlessness of power in the face of an authentic movement of revolutionary resistance, and would substantially weaken inside the United States the advocates and the practitioners of counter-revolutionary activism abroad. It would not by any means mark their final defeat. But it would at least help place the Yahoos on the defensive, and strengthen the current towards a no doubt agonizing reappraisal of American foreign policies. An American victory in Vietnam, on the other hand, meaning the retention of control in South Vietnam over a client régime, would give an appreciable boost to what C. Wright Mills so aptly called the "crackpot realists" in the United States. In an age where men have learned the secret that hunger, poverty and exploitation are not God-given but man-made, and can therefore be man-unmade, it would make more likely American attempts to stifle, in blood and terror, the political convulsions which such knowledge must inevitably engender. On that road lies a further transformation of American society into a garrison state; and at the end of it lies a holocaust far greater than in Vietnam.

II

These are grounds enough for speaking of Vietnam as an **enormous** challenge, not only to socialists, but above all to them. But what, it might well be asked, could the Western Left realistically have hoped to do to meet the challenge and to discharge the responsibility created by the character and the wider significance of the war in Vietnam? After all, the war is being waged by a government over which the Western Left has no direct hold. In what sense is it then appropriate to speak of default?

It is true that, in the nature of the case, the Western labour and socialist movements could not have hoped to make a decisive difference to the course and the outcome of the war itself: to think that they could is to mistake the extent of their potential influence in present-day world politics. But this is not the same thing as saying that they could not have made an appreciable difference to the course of events.

Thus, a really determined and powerful movement of protest in a country like Britain might have forced its government to take a much more critical, certainly a less servile, attitude to American actions and policies in Vietnam. How great a difference this would have made to the American government itself may **be** arguable. But it can hardly be claimed that an early British dissociation from the United States would have made no difference. After all, the American administration itself has made no secret of the political and diplomatic importance it

attached to the unwavering support of a British Labour Government. Its judgement, on this issue at least, must be taken as sound. For critical dissociation by the Labour Government would certainly have had repercussions in other countries, particularly in countries with strong social-democratic movements, and, to put it no higher, made more difficult the steadily more murderous activities in which the United States has been engaged in Vietnam. Nor is it seriously arguable that such critical dissociation would have been a powerful source of encouragement to the opposition to the war in the United States.

It is necessary to focus upon that opposition. For while the American political leaders may be impervious to the voice of humanity, conscience and reason, they cannot afford to be deaf to internal political opposition. If they were, their political rivals would not be. It is in this sense that the American opposition to the war assumes crucial importance.

Everybody knows the weaknesses of that "other America", and European socialists in particular tend to dwell upon these weaknesses with a sense of complacent superiority which their own record, for all their vaunted ideological and political sophistication, scarcely warrants. For this American opposition does exist, and has involved very substantial numbers of people, in the universities, in the professions, in the civil rights movement and in many other areas of American life, including some elements of a trade union movement whose incorporation in American capitalism is one of the major historical tragedies of the twentieth century; and some parts of the opposition to the war, notably the student movement, have shown themselves to be at least as determined and radical as anything which the Western Left, in roughly comparable circumstances, has been able to produce. Nor, when gauging this opposition, should one ignore the agonized seriousness, the searching, often the savage, integrity with which many people in it have conducted what amounts to an inquest on the American dream. Here, as the stench of burning flesh reaches across 6,000 miles, lies the promise of a new American radicalism, which is also one of humanity's hopes for escape from endless killing.

It is precisely because this opposition is still weak, yet so important, that it was incumbent for the opposition outside the United States to give it, by the volume and determination of its own movement of protest, every possible support and encouragement. The fact that it has not done more to that purpose, that it has, in a country like Britain, allowed its leaders to weaken the opposition to the war in America, is the measure of its default.

More generally, however, the question of what the West European Left could have done to influence the course of the war in Vietnam

tends to obscure its responsibilities, *irrespective* of any question of immediate and specific effectiveness. Even if they had been able to do *nothing* about Vietnam itself, it would still have been the duty of socialists to make their protest heard as loudly as humanly possible; and not by any means as a worthy but futile gesture, or as a salve to conscience. On the contrary, such protest, even if it had had no impact whatever on the Vietnamese war, would still have been required as part of a task which falls above all upon socialists to assert rational and humane alternatives to the brutalized here and now, and to explain to a confused, misled but available public opinion the true meaning of Vietnam as an exceptionally bloody but by no means isolated episode in the international civil war of our times. This is not a task which requires the guarantee or even the likelihood of immediate and specific success: for socialists, its performance is its own justification.

It is of course the case that many people, in many countries, have done what they could to protest against American actions in Vietnam over the long and bitter years. There have been meetings, marches, demonstrations, teach-ins, vigils, and a whole variety of other activities, geared to the same purpose.

But what is significant about these activities is that they have, for the most part, been organized *outside* the main institutions of the working-class movements; and that the most eloquent voices against the slaughter have been those of men who are also outside these institutions, men like **Sartre**, Deutscher, above all **Bertrand Russell**, whose magnificent witness against the new barbarism will be remembered and honoured tomorrow as Voltaire's witness against the old absolutism is remembered and honoured today. In Britain, many people who are members of the Labour Party have taken part in the organization of protest. But the Labour Party itself has of course had nothing to do with this protest and its leaders have in fact done their best to paralyse and arrest it.

In contrast, Communist leaders in countries like France and Italy have strongly denounced American actions in North and South Vietnam, and expressed support for the Vietnamese struggle against imperialism. It would therefore be grossly unfair and inaccurate to equate their attitude with that of social-democratic leaders; and it could be claimed for a small British Communist Party that its resources were not equal to a greater effort. But in countries where they represent the largest part of the organized working class, and where their ideological and political influence over large sectors of national life is considerable, the effort of Communist parties over Vietnam has surely fallen remarkably short of what the challenge presented to them required. These parties may well point to declarations of support and

solidarity, to occasional meetings and demonstrations, and to participation in the activities organized by others. What they cannot claim is that they have sought to mobilize their movements and public opinion at large through a major and sustained effort of propaganda and education. It is enough to remember the fierce energy, the passionate zeal which Communist parties and movements devoted—quite **rightly**—to the mobilization of opinion in the early fifties against the judicial murder of the Rosenbergs, in immeasurably less propitious circumstances, to realize how unsustained, tentative, episodic, has been their effort against mass murder in Vietnam. And their voice, when it has been heard, has been oddly muffled, lacking in socialist distinctiveness, in principled commitment to the cause of the South Vietnamese resistance. At times, they too have even given the impression of half accepting the view that the war was a conflict between the United States and North Vietnam, and that the bombing of North Vietnam was the only real **obsacle** to a "settlement" which would leave that South Vietnamese resistance movement to the tender mercies of a Ngo Dinh Diem or Ky **régime** under another name, and which would thus repeat the grim story of the years which followed the conclusion of the Geneva agreement ~ . ~

In this light, it is of relatively small consequence that the **social-democratic** default over Vietnam has been greater than the Communist one. After all, the challenge to Communist parties was in a sense also much greater, given the ideological and political affinities which might be supposed to bind these parties to the Vietnamese resistance, North and South. The affinities may well be deeply felt by large masses of Communist party members; but these feelings have not found commensurate expression in the attitudes and actions of their parties.

It is in this common social-democratic and Communist default, however different in degree it may be, that surely lies at least a part of the explanation for one of the most notable and ominous features about the war in Vietnam, namely that its horrors have become part of the televised routine of our times, that the direct evidence of a hundred Guernicas and Lidices, of infamous means employed for an infamous cause, has in the main been received and accepted with relative indifference and incomprehension; and that even among those in whom these horrors have evoked anger, guilt and shame, such feelings have generally been accompanied by a sense of despair at how little could be done to make them politically meaningful and effective. Herein too lies the default of the traditional political formations of the organized working class. For it was upon them above all that lay the responsibility for giving effective direction and political **thrust** to those who did care, and for seeking to arouse a public opinion daily subjected to an enormous volume of mendacious propaganda.

It is not, however, enough to note this default or to bemoan it, or to treat it as a passing aberration over a single issue of policy. Much more is here involved than these movements' response to Vietnam. That response is only a manifestation of their present general condition. It is that condition itself which requires discussion.

III

It is inevitable that such a discussion should begin with party leaders, though it cannot by any means end with them. To fasten on them alone is to help obscure the gravity of the problem, and its complexity.

It is certainly true, to take the Labour Party first, that its leaders must bear a major share of the direct and immediate responsibility for a response which, in its consistent defence of American actions in Vietnam, certainly constitutes the most shameful chapter in the history of that party. Well might the *Sunday Times* write in 1965 that "as pressure mounts for a British initiative to bring the Vietnam fighting to an end, we may be thankful that the Labour Party is in office and not in Opposition. Were the Conservatives now in power publicly expressing with the same staunchness that Mr. Wilson has maintained, their support for the United States, the uproar from the Labour benches would by now have become deafening".⁸ The point is the more apt in that many Labour leaders, from Mr. Wilson downwards, had made no secret, while in opposition, of their belief that the United States was fighting in Vietnam an unjust war against an authentic and indigenous resistance movement. It was only after they came to office in October 1964 that they discovered that the conflict was really about aggression from North Vietnam against South Vietnam, and that they turned into the faithful apologists for American policies and actions. And the same servility has characterized the "peace initiatives" which the Labour leaders eventually did take, since these "initiatives" merely echoed the American lie that the major protagonist of the war *was* North Vietnam, and that the only obstacle to a just settlement lay in the latter's refusal to enter upon the sort of negotiations which would, in fact, have amounted to the betrayal of the South Vietnamese resistance movement, and to the achievement by the United States of a victory which it has been unable to attain by military means.

All this, however, and much else about the record of the Labour leaders over Vietnam is in a sense less important than the relative ease with which they have been able, throughout, to contain and to paralyse protest within the Labour Party and the Labour movement at large.

Nor, when speaking of protest, should the crucial point be **over-**

looked that the vast majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party and of the trade union leadership has never shown the slightest intention of protesting at all, however mildly. These were not men writhing in agonized loyalty to leaders whose policies they thought mistaken. On the contrary, their support for these leaders has not only been "loyal" but, to all appearances, eager. The point surely needs to be carefully integrated into any assessment of what, from a socialist point of view, may be expected from the Labour Party, now and in the future.

The parliamentary Left, on the other hand, did writhe. But it can hardly be claimed that, for **all** its writhing, it provided anything like the principled and sustained opposition which the Government's derelictions, in this as in so many other fields, so obviously required. From October **1964** until March **1966**, it took refuge behind the Government's tiny parliamentary majority, and the supposed dangers of "rocking the boat". The point might be taken more seriously had its attitude changed after March **1966**, when the boat had acquired so much dead weight that there was very little danger of "rocking" it, and when a more resolute parliamentary Left would have striven immeasurably harder to gain the support of the *Labour movement* against the policies of their leaders. Its responsibility was all the greater in that the Labour rank and file tends to look to parliamentarians for leadership. Over Vietnam, as over so much else, it has looked in vain. Far from providing the Labour movement with a clear lead, the parliamentary Left, with a few honorable exceptions, has shown itself indecisive, equivocal and all too willing to clutch at any straw which might save it from having to defy its leadership. Again and again, it has allowed itself to be smothered by the Government's "peace initiatives", however hollow these moves might appear to everybody else. Seldom can a parliamentary opposition with any pretensions to socialist rectitude have been so easily contained over an issue of such dimensions. For all practical purposes, **the parliamentary** Left, far from opposing the moral collapse which has characterized the Government's actions since it came to power, has in fact shared it; and the point, it might be added, applies with even greater force to those erstwhile "leftwingers" who, having gained office under Mr. Wilson, have been irremediably tarred with the collective guilt implicit in the collective responsibility which, by staying in office, they have agreed to assume.

Here, too, however, it is not enough to blame the parliamentary Left. For only a *movement* so ideologically weak, so steeped in *un-socialist* modes of thinking, so bureaucratically confined in its political habits, could have reacted so feebly, and been persuaded by its leaders to accept policies and attitudes which contradict every principle for

which its members are supposed to stand. It is in this sense that Vietnam speaks so directly to the present condition of the British Labour movement.

The search for remedies to this condition needs as its basis the clear awareness that these do not lie readily at hand, that a "solution" does not lie buried somewhere, waiting to be discovered by some ideological or political diviner. To believe that what now ails the Labour movement will be cured by formula, slogan or incantation is to perpetuate illusions which are part of the disease.

In fact, any **attempt** at prescription must start **with** a negative proposition which needs to be incorporated in the prescription itself. This is that there does not exist in Britain, or for that matter in any country where social democracy dominates the working class organizations, a mass movement in any meaningful sense committed to anything remotely presaging a socialist transformation of society. There are of course a good many socialists in these organizations, but there are few lessons more important for them to learn that their parties do not hold any kind of promise that they will, even in a distant perspective, become agencies of socialist change. The point applies no less to the British Labour Party than to **Willi Brand's** German Social-Democratic Party or to **Guy Mollet's** S.F.I.O. or to **Pietro Nenni's** Socialist Party. This may not require a socialist exodus from these parties, and socialists may argue, on the basis of particular circumstances, that here, however ungrateful, is the soil which they must till. What it does require, however, is an awareness of the true nature of these organizations, and of their prospects. Socialist work in such parties can only be seriously undertaken on the basis of that awareness. To shun such awareness, as so many socialists inside the Labour Party have done over the years, is to pursue a soul-destroying mirage, to dwell in a never-never land in which the politics of pathetic manoeuvre are grotesquely elevated to the status of socialist strategy. In this connection, it is revealing of the British Communist Party's own political fuzziness that it both shares and propagates that illusion, and appears to argue, with a zeal worthy of a better cause, that, if only "the Left unites", the leaders of the Labour Party will, by the processes which remain obstinately undefined, be supplanted by socialist ones, or that these leaders will, by even more mysterious means, be themselves transformed into socialist wamors. This is to substitute incantation for prescription, and self-excludes its practitioners from any claim to the leadership of a serious socialist movement.

Such a movement will not come into existence until a much larger number of people come to believe in its necessity. And this will not happen without a major effort of socialist education, inside **the** Labour

Party and out, which also entails a major effort of self-education. Political activism is an intrinsic part of such an effort. But it cannot in itself produce the kind of fundamental ideological re-building which is required. The forms which this effort should assume, and the ways in which it should be organized, are subject to discussion. The need itself is not.

IV

The case of the large Communist parties appears in many ways different from that of the social-democratic ones. But in some important ways it is not.

No doubt, it may be argued that the French Communist Party has, over Vietnam, had a special "problem", namely the fact that President de Gaulle, alone among the Western leaders, has adopted an explicitly "anti-American" attitude on this as on other issues. But that this should have constituted a problem at all for a Communist Party is itself significant. For de Gaulle's opposition to American policy, praiseworthy though it may be in comparison with the servility of other Western leaders, is conceived and expressed in nationalist terms which have nothing to do with the socialist case against the United States' role in Vietnam and in the rest of the world. Nor does that opposition, in practice, go beyond periodic expressions of disapproval which have little concrete substance and which do not call into question an underlying capitalist solidarity. De Gaulle's virtue, as so often since 1958, has been bought on the cheap and his pronouncements and policies have left, or should have left, plenty of room for the kind of protest and education which might be thought to be the particular responsibility of a genuine revolutionary party. The Gaullist excuse is a poor one, and cannot in any case be invoked in favour of the Italian Communist Party, whose response to Vietnam has not been basically different from that of the French. The reason for the Communist default must be sought elsewhere.

Many people have found it in the **Sino-Soviet** conflict, or rather in the whole-hearted ideological espousal by these parties of the Soviet side of the dispute. There is obviously something in this, both in terms of the deep malaise and the demoralization which has been caused, in all socialist movements throughout the world, by that conflict; and also, more specifically in regard to Vietnam, by the fact that the Russian leaders have themselves reacted very **ambiguously** to American intervention, denouncing aggression and giving a measure of aid to Vietnam on the one hand, and pursuing a friendly, even eager dialogue over all else with the aggressors on the other. Moreover, the Russian leaders have increasingly conveyed the distinct impression that they too would find acceptable, indeed that they might actively

press, for a "settlement" which would in effect leave the United States in control of South Vietnam.

This "moderation" of the Soviet leaders may well be a factor in the relative weakness of the response to Vietnam of Western Communist parties and in the ambiguity which it is not very difficult to detect in their own approach to a settlement of the conflict. But this can only be a very partial explanation. For it does not account for the reason why these parties do align themselves on Soviet attitudes. If the Soviet impact upon them is so marked, it must be because these attitudes serve to reinforce their own particular ideological and political dispositions. After all, Western Communist parties do not have to shape their reactions to Vietnam, or to anything else, in accordance with Soviet policies. Here surely is an instance where an often proclaimed "polycentrism" might be deemed to apply; whatever internal or strategic considerations may impel the Russian leaders to adopt this or that policy in international affairs cannot automatically be deemed to apply to other Communist leaders. The conclusion is inescapable that if they do share in the ambiguities of the Soviet Union in regard to Vietnam, it is because this corresponds to some basic features of their own internal condition. The Russian alibi, which they themselves do not of course invoke, is not much better than the Gaullist one in the case of the French Communist Party.

Ultimately, the reason why Western Communist Parties have **faile** to discharge their responsibility over Vietnam to any adequate degree is that the kind of political effort this would have required does not correspond to their leaders' view of their role in the internal politics of their countries. For many years now, they have behaved as if they wished above all to become "normal" parties, part of the ordinary political competition in their societies. This demands a degree of "reasonableness", of "moderation", of "respectability", all of which are incompatible with that determined and intransigent assertion of socialist principles and purposes which ought to be their overriding concern. Again and again, these parties have opportunistically muffled such an assertion, particularly over foreign policy for the sake of hoped-for accommodation with political elements which have long ceased to have any serious commitment to socialist principle or policies at all, or which are explicitly hostile to such a commitment. This is nothing very new in the history of these parties; after all, their expulsion from the post-war coalitions was a mainly involuntary one, and their subsequent exile from "ordinary" politics, which was equally involuntary, can hardly be said to have been used by them for a desperately needed reassessment of the **rôle** which an authentically revolutionary socialist party ought to play in the political life of advanced capitalism. On the contrary, a large part of their concern

has been to contain or even, as in the case of the French Communist Party, to stifle the internal debate which this required, and to use a highly bureaucratized apparatus to protect themselves from internal criticism.

As one looks at the recent history of these parties, one cannot but be struck by their increasing resemblance to German Social-Democracy before 1914, with its electoral obsessions, its parliamentary fixation, its eagerness to "belong", the hollowness of its rhetoric, its conception of politics as manoeuvre, its consequent abdication from principled socialist politics, and its unwillingness, for the sake of immediate political advantage, to engage in the slow and arduous task of building a truly conscious, ideologically cohesive popular socialist movement which is the only basis upon which socialist change can be achieved.

Nor is this very remarkable since the ideological and therefore the political and moral level at which these parties operate is generally so low. Of course, they are "marxist" parties. But the Marxism they profess, like that of their counterparts in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, is a vulgarized, manipulative, **sloganized** phraseology which bears as much relation to socialist thought as witch medicine bears to medical science. This is no basis for socialist politics.

It is by no means impossible that these parties will be successful in their present tactics and that they will, in the proximate future, come to be the pillars of governmental coalitions in countries like France and Italy. But this incorporation in political life will not, it may be said with the utmost confidence, be on terms that hold out the perspective of socialist change in these countries. Such incorporation, far from bringing the conditions of socialist change any nearer, pushes them further away beyond the horizon, by the compromises, the accommodations and the demoralisation which are an inherent part of this sort of politics.

These are, as the Chinese quite rightly claim, "revisionist" parties, in the bad sense of the word. Unfortunately, the "Chinese" alternatives to social democracy and to Western Communism, rather than offering a cure for the disease, are another manifestation of it. For if the former's immersion, or hoped-for immersion in bourgeois politics is barren of socialist promise, neither can the particular brand of "Marxism-Leninism" advanced by a variety of groupings in Western Europe which derive their inspiration from Peking be deemed to be an appropriate theoretical or practical answer to present problems and dilemmas. In fact, the recreation of an authentic socialist movement in Western Europe is more likely to be hindered than helped by the substitution of slogans for thought, which is typical of most of these groupings. It is not from these quarters that is likely to come the

inspiration or the impulse for the tremendous theoretical and ideological renewal which, no less than in the case of social democratic parties if at a different level, is one of the most urgent, perhaps the most urgent, requirement of the labour and communist movements in these countries.

Vietnam has served to illuminate the present decrepitude of Western socialism, and the fact that there is at present no party or movement, however large and influential, which can legitimately and realistically claim to be the appropriate agency for socialist change—not, it should be **blindingly** obvious, the social-democratic parties, which are now solidly bourgeois formations, in full retreat from whatever socialist commitment they have ever had; and not either the large Communist parties, which now seem destined to fill the place left in the political spectrum by social democracy. Nor does this only affect the necessarily long-term objective of socialist change. It also affects, and **relatedly**, the defence of the immediate and corporate interests of the Western working classes. In the conditions of advanced capitalism, movements which do not work to long-term socialist objectives cannot even be relied on to be vigorous in the defence of short-term "reformist" ones.

A deep moral, ideological and political crisis now grips Western socialism, so deep as to suggest that a whole chapter of **socialist** history and experience in Western Europe is now drawing to a close. Recovery from that crisis will not really begin until its full nature and extent are probed and understood, without despair but also without illusion.

February 1967

NOTES

1. At the beginning of January 1967, the *Observer* correspondent in Washington reported that "at Christmas, 12 Catholic, Protestant and Jewish clergymen told the President in a letter that 'the heartless war in Vietnam continues with the United States and South Vietnamese forces matching the terror and assassinations of the Vietcong by killing somewhere from two to five civilians for every Vietcong guerilla or North Vietnamese regular'. If one accepts this ratio, it would appear that between 320,000 and 800,000 civilians have been killed since the start of 1961". In an article in the New Left magazine *Ramparts*, the same correspondent notes, "Dr. Benjamin Spock and other war critics claim that 'a million children have been killed or wounded or burned . . .'. Exact figures may be in question, but that hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese men and women and children have been killed is not. As for "matching the terror and assassinations of the Vietcong", "the Pentagon has figures showing that 20,400 civilians have been killed by the Vietcong since the start of 1962, and 4,303 'officials' since 1961". (The *Observer*, 8 January 1967.)
2. An American official, wholly dedicated to an American victory, observed after serving in Saigon that if North Vietnamese military support were

withdrawn, "the Vietcong would be weakened, but probably not much more than the efficiency of the Pentagon would be reduced if the air conditioning were shut off". (J. Mecklin, *Mission in Torment* (1965), p. 303). Many independent observers have come to the same conclusion.

3. In this connection, it is, as in the case of so many important features of the Vietnamese war, far too little realized that Geneva, for the South Vietnamese resistance movement and for the South Vietnamese people generally, was an almost unrelieved disaster, given the surrender of vast parts of the country which it entailed to Ngo Dinh Diem and all the other Bourbons who returned in the American baggage train.
4. *Sunday Times*, 14th March 1965.