

## THE BATTLE FOR SOCIALIST IDEAS IN THE 1980s

Stuart Hall

I am honoured to be asked to give the first Fred Tonge lecture. I am pleased to be associated with the inspiration behind it, which is to commemorate the link between theory and practice, between socialist ideas and socialist politics, and thereby keep alive the memory of someone who served the labour movement in both these ways throughout his life. Fred Tonge's commitment to socialism did not wane with age, as it has in so many other quarters. His commitment to socialist internationalism did not degenerate into that parochialism which so often besets our movement. He understood the absolute centrality of political education to the achievement of socialism. Those are very distinctive qualities and I want, in what follows to make a small contribution to their continuity. So I have chosen to talk about the struggle, the battle, for socialist ideas in the 1980s.

First, I want to say something about the importance of ideological struggle. Thinking about the place and role of ideas in the construction of socialism, I would particularly **emphasise** the notion of struggle itself: ideology is a battlefield and every other kind of struggle has a stake in it. I want therefore to talk about the ideological pre-condition for socialist advance: the winning of a majority of the people—the working people of the society and their allies—to socialist ideas in the decades immediately ahead. I stress the centrality of the domain of the ideological—political ideas and the struggle to win hearts and minds to socialism—because I am struck again and again by the way in which socialists still assume that somehow socialism is inevitable. It is not coming perhaps quite as fast as we assumed: not trundling along in our direction with quite the speed and enthusiasm we would hope; but nevertheless, bound sooner or later to, as it were, take command. socialism, it is felt, remains the natural centre of gravity of working-class ideas, and only a temporary, magical spell could divert working-class consciousness from its natural aim.

One can recognise a certain kind of Marxist 'traditionalism' behind this notion of the 'inevitable triumph of socialist ideas'. But, actually, it is even more deeply rooted in the non-Marxist, 'labourist', traditions. Vulgar economism comes in many disguises. Socialist ideas, having taken root in the culture, will never die; socialism is the true, the 'objective consciousness', of the class; material conditions will always make working people

think 'socialism'; once a Labour voter, always a Labour voter; the welfare state is here to stay. And so on. If the 'laws of history' do not, then familial habit and electoral inertia will make 'correct ideas' win through in the end.

I have to confess I no longer subscribe to that view. I think perhaps I once did; but I believe now that, if socialism is not *made* by us, it certainly will not be made *for* us, not even by the laws of history. The alternative which Marx offered: namely, 'socialism or barbarism', sometimes seems to be more powerfully tilted, at the end of the twentieth century, towards barbarism than socialism. The capacity of a nuclear-filled world to destroy itself in the defence of some frozen social system, or some lofty ideal, is as much on the cards as the triumph of socialism in the advanced industrial capitalist world. We have to abandon the notion that socialism will somehow come in spite of how effectively we struggle for it; and I think that is also true for socialist ideas. Since it is possible to conceive of a world without human life, it is possible to envisage a world without socialism.

I want to say something about what lies behind the untenable notion of the inevitable triumph of socialist ideas, and suggest some of the reasons why that is not a socialism in which we can any longer indulge ourselves. There is a strong assumption that, in a class society like ours, where the vast majority of working people are continuously at the negative, the receiving end of the system, the social and material conditions in which working people themselves live will inevitably predispose them towards socialism. And I think that this proposition contains a profound materialist truth—despite the reconstruction job we have had to do on the classical materialist theory of ideology. Marx once remarked that you do not literally have to be a shop keeper all your life to have petty bourgeois ideas—an observation demonstrated by our own prime minister. It is true that if you live constantly in a corner shop and try to squeeze a living under advanced capitalism from that particular corner of it, you will be strongly inclined to *think* that that is actually how the world works. Similarly, if you are always at the exploiting end of an economic, social and political system, there is a built-in tendency, in the very material conditions in which the class has to live and survive, to think of socialist ideas as most effectively capturing the interests of the working class and the stake of working people in the future of their own society.

Still, there is no *inevitable* or *guaranteed* link between class origin and political ideas. What matters, Marx suggested, was whether or not, in your thinking you go beyond the horizon of thought typical of the petty-bourgeois—the sort of spontaneous thinking which arises when one tries to *live* one's relation to an advanced capitalist economy as if it were simply the old corner shop writ large. This might be called the 'Grantham' world-view. Undoubtedly, living at the exploited end of a system creates a powerful tendency to see the world in terms of 'us' and 'them': the

governing and the governed, the powerful and the powerless, the possessing and the possessed. 'Us' and 'them' is the spontaneous consciousness of all exploited classes and oppressed people everywhere: what Gramsci called their 'good' sense. And, though social struggles have their roots deep in the structural contradictions of a system, they cannot become politically active unless they become articulated through this oppressor/oppressed form of consciousness.

The problem is that even this tendency cannot provide socialism with a permanent guarantee. 'Us' and 'them' can be represented, politically through a number of different political ideologies. It underpins reformism or 'Labourism' just as much as it does more revolutionary positions. Even working class *deference* can feed off this built-in sense of class difference. So, there may be good materialist reasons why, in some circumstances, socialist ideas do win support among the working class. But there is certainly no materialist guarantee that only socialism can represent the interests of the working class and their stake in the future. And the addition of 'true' to the word 'interests' only begs the question: an attempt to save our historical face. Interests may be the motor of political action. But interests frequently conflict: the 'interest' in defending one's standard of living against the interest in remaining in employment—a contradiction which Mrs Thatcher, Mr Tebbit and Mr Michael Edwardes—to name but three—have not hesitated to exploit. Moreover, working class interests do not exist outside of the political space in which they are defined, or outside of the political discourses which give them sense or outside the balance of forces which define the limits of the possible in which they have to be realised. Materialism remains active. But its tendency is not uni-directional. Socialism, it carries no absolute guarantees.

We have to confess that socialist ideas have come and gone among working people in our own society throughout recent history. A significant proportion of the British working class has consistently voted the other way. The deference vote amongst that class is not an insignificant proportion and it is not historically transient. We have to acknowledge that though, of course, material condition may predispose working people to think in the direction of the reform and reconstruction of a system which exploits them in so many ways, they do not guarantee that economic and social position will always be translated into a political project or will and of itself—without political organisation and education—give birth spontaneously to socialist ideas.

The working class, as we know it, is itself powerfully divided and stratified internally. It is not always unified in its origins, though it may become unified through its political practice. It can *become* unified, but it is not unified as it is. As it is, it is sectoralised; impregnated by ideas, interests and outlooks from elsewhere. It is marked by the contradictory conditions in which it came to maturity: for instance by the uneven

impact of the social and sexual division of labour under capitalism. The unity of working class political movements, activities and ideas around a common socialist core would not be a reflection of what the class already is 'in-itself' but the effect of the involvement of a 'class-in-itself', in a 'politics-for-itself'. That shift involves something more than merely translating one's every-day, lived-experience into the socialist project. It means qualifying, criticising, interrogating working class 'experience'. It means often, breaking the mould of working class common sense.

I know this idea runs right against the grain of **libertarian-socialist** received wisdom in the 1980s. Socialists who work as intellectual people have come to understand the costs of their profound separation from the lived, everyday, experience of working people under capitalism. They are also deeply, and correctly, suspicious of setting themselves up as a vanguard to bring socialism to the masses 'from the outside'. In the light of the Bolshevik experience, we know what happens when the party is substituted for the class, and the leadership for the party, and so on. But, in the post-1968 period, such people have been driven to the opposite and equally untenable alternative: Narodnikism. This is the view that 'the people' are *already*, really socialist; and this will come through if we **only** allow them to speak. The role of socialists is therefore simply to be the 'voice' of this already adequate experience: to flatter the 'authenticity' of working class experience and its spontaneous consciousness by simply *affirming* it.

But this cannot be correct, either. If socialism were simply the flowering of what already exists, and nothing more, why hasn't it defeated its enemies before now? Even more **worryingly**, if under capitalism the working class is able to live its relation to its conditions of existence transparently, 'authentically', why does it have need for socialism at all? The division of labour has inscribed itself indelibly across the face of the working classes, and nowhere more damagingly than in the division between mental and manual, physical and intellectual labour. But you don't **overcome** the capitalist division of labour by denying that it exists. Only by going beyond it, in reality, in practice. By breaking down some of the divisions, through political education and organisation; by setting—slowly, painfully—in their place, an alternative division of labour. That is why, in spite of all the traps which lie in wait of the attempt to restore the question of 'party' to socialist politics today, the fragmented political scene continues to be haunted by the absent ghost of—not *the* Party (there are plenty of those), but of 'party' in Gramsci's sense. For it is only in the course of political organisation and practice ('party') that the damaging divisions of status between manual and intellectual labour, between the intellectual function (**all** of us, since we all think) and those who do intellectual work for a living (a very small number of us) can actually be overcome, so that the conditions for genuine political

education—learning and teaching beyond the hierarchies of 'teacher' and 'taught', 'vanguard' and 'mass'—can be created. This failure to find an alternative basis for political education—alternative to either the 'vanguardist' or the 'narodnikist' solutions—is part of a larger political crisis: the crisis of political organisation which has afflicted the left since Leninism lost its magic in **1956**, and since **1968**, when to be 'radical' meant, by definition, to be 'radically against *all* parties, party lines and party bureaucracies': the 'inside—not beyond—the fragments' problem. This problem of 'party' represents an unsurpassed limit in the politics of the left today: a line we seem able neither to return to nor pass across. But we **shouldn't** mistake this *dilemma* for a *solution*!

It is true that working class experience—the experience of exploitation and of '**secondariness**'—is the soil in which socialism takes root. Without it we may have all manner of '**radicalisms**'—including the spurious extremisms of 'armed struggle'. But we will not have socialism. On the other hand, if working class 'experience' is the necessary, it is not the sufficient condition for socialism or for socialist ideas today. First, because working class 'common sense' under capitalism *must* be fragmentary and contradictory. It is inscribed with the traces of heterogeneous ideas. It contains in the same thought, as Gramsci remarked, modern and archaic, progressive and stone-age, elements. Experience as such is historically shaped. It is constituted through ideological categories—how can we feel and reason entirely outside the categories of our own culture? It cannot, despite its appearance of immediate authenticity, *escape* its own history. Second, because the lived experience of class exploitation is not the only brand which socialism in the twentieth century must incorporate; it is not the only variant of exploitation which socialism must address, though it may be the *modal* one, the one through which all the other social contradictions are reflected, the paradigm instance. Therefore, other types of social experiences will have to be drawn on, built into socialism if it is to become a politics capable of condensing the variety of social struggles into a single, differentiated one, or—to put the metaphor the other way—if it is to become a politics capable of fighting and transforming life on a variety of different 'fronts'. Once we abandon the guarantee that working class ideas will 'inevitably tend towards socialism' as their given, teleological end, or that everything else follows once socialism begins, it has to be acknowledged that sexist and racist and jingoist ideas have deeply penetrated and naturalised themselves in sectors of working class thinking. Such ideas—frequently drawing exactly on 'immediate experience', and simply mirroring it—are not consonant with socialism. In the name of socialism itself (not in the name of some superior wisdom) they will have to be interrogated, corrected, transformed, *educated*. And, without falling back into vanguardism we must—for all our sakes—find a way of undertaking this far-reaching political and ideological struggle *against* 'working

class common sense' *inside* the class itself.

Experience has many diversions, many structures. The 'experience' of the British working class is also the massive historical experience of **corporate-**ness, and of the struggle against incorporation. The moment one says this one is likely to be pounced on by the keepers of revolutionary purity as living proof of one's lack of faith in the capacities of the class. This is polemical rubbish. Corporateness is simply an acknowledgement of where, under capitalism, the majority of working people are *positioned*. Otherwise, why would one need the Marxist concept of 'exploitation' at all? Within that, the British working class is also the most 'experienced' industrial class in the history of capitalism, rich in political traditions and culture. It has generated organisation in depth, capable of defending class interests and advancing its cause. It is a class wisdom of the infinite negotiations and resistances necessary for survival within the culture of capitalism. It has immense *depth* in defence. And yet, socialism—of course—requires something more, something that does not arise spontaneously: a class which can transform itself from the secondary to the *leading* element in society. A class which aspires to refashion the world in its image. A class capable of conducting a struggle in areas of civil society, moral and intellectual life and the state, *outside* of its 'immediate' class experience; a class capable of winning the 'war of position' in relation to a whole complex of social movements which do not spontaneously cohere around *the* 'class experience'. We do not yet have a class which is driving to make itself the hegemonic element in society: which sees its purpose, not to defend but to *lead*. Experience of exploitation, alone, will not create a 'class-for-itself' in this sense, though socialism in the twentieth century requires it.

We also have to acknowledge that working people are not 'unified' around any single political philosophy or ideology, let alone socialism. There are different kinds of socialist ideas and the labour movement in this country has gravitated for often quite understandable reasons towards reformism. Political reformism represents a strong, indigenous British political tradition: as authentic a working class tradition as the revolutionary one. It represents a different, more adaptive, negotiated, way of struggling for survival inside a system. But it is not an illusion. It is not false consciousness. It is not that working people do not understand the nature of the game in which they are involved. In part, all politics is a form of political calculation; and some people, under certain circumstances will calculate, for themselves, their children, and people they love and work with, that it is better to take advantage of whatever advances you can make rather than cutting off the head of the goose that sometimes—occasionally—lays a golden egg. In a system that usually yields *something* under pressure at the eleventh hour, reformism has its own kind of 'rationality'. All the same, reformism is *not* the same **as** socialism.

I do not want to make a kind of absolute divide or fetish of the distinction between them. But in the year of the Social-Democratic Party one has to distinguish in a very sharp way between the two. It is certainly important not to fall into the trap of repeating the formal, abstract opposition between reform and revolution—a specious piece of left formalism. Still we must understand the clear line that divides socialists from people who would like to see society more humanely governed, who are more open to progressive ideas, who would like to see people who have not had much out of life getting on a little. Those are all sound, worthy, reformist ideas. They are what you might call socialism without tears. Socialism without all that bother about the working class. They are political change without political power: the great liberal illusion in twentieth-century fancy dress. Well, reformism is not only a long and important tradition. Actually, it has always been the *dominant* tradition *inside* the Labour Party itself. But it is not socialism. I do not want to rely on the rhetoric or received wisdom of the past, because one of the requirements of a socialism without *guarantees* must be to rethink what socialism might mean in the 1980s and 1990s. But nevertheless, one thing it has always meant and that is a fundamental reshaping of the social relations *and* the institutions in which men and women live.

Socialism has in its past learnt a good deal from progressive people who have contributed in important ways to the labour movement. I expect it always will try to show that only socialism can create the conditions in which *reform* can make a fundamental difference rather than introducing minor modifications. But progressivism can never provide the lure of socialist ideas. Between good reformism and the will to socialism runs what William Morris once called the 'river of fire'. **As** soon as socialism touches the imagination, people of course do still go on living just as they did before, trying to survive, coming to terms with a society in which they have to make an existence. But their imaginations have been fired by the possibility of an alternative way of making life with other people, and nothing less will do. Socialism may be just half the *turn* of a screw away from reformist and progressive ideas but it is the final twist that counts. It is what makes the difference between good and humane people and committed socialists: between the logic of one principle of social *organisa-tion* and another.

Now when that gulf opens, the river of fire dissects people's lives, and they glimpse the possibilities, not of having the existing set of social relations improved a bit, but of beginning the long, dangerous historical process of reconstructing society according to a different model, a different logic and principle that does not come 'spontaneously'. It does not drop like manna from the skies. It has to be made, constructed and struggled over. Socialist ideas win only because they displace other, not so good, not so powerful ideas. They only command a space because they grip

people's imagination, or they connect with people's experience; or they make better sense of the world they live in; or they are better at analysing what is happening; or they provide a language of difference and resistance; or they capture and embody people's hopes. Apart from their *effectivity* there is no guarantee that socialist ideas must and will prevail over other ideas. In that sense, I believe that the struggle for socialist ideas is a continuous one. It is something which will have to go on under actual existing socialism itself. I am even quite tempted by the thought of that much discredited leader of the people, Chairman Mao, that the period of socialist construction might be the moment of *greatest* intensity in the battle for socialist ideas.

Why then is the terrain for socialist ideas so stony in the 1980s? One can think of many good reasons but, I refer here to only three. The first I can deal with quickly, though it may surprise you. I think that one of the reasons why the terrain for socialist ideas is so stony is the fact, the legacy, the experience of Stalinism. By this I mean something quite different from the usual simple minded anti-communism. Nevertheless I do think that, when they speak to people drawn and attracted to socialism, socialists today have something to explain, to account for: about why the attempts to transform some societies in the image of socialism has produced this grim caricature of socialism. I know that the transformation of relatively backward societies is a much more difficult and prolonged process than most of us imagine; that 'socialism in one country' is not a particularly good way to have to start; that all is not lost in these societies, that the struggle for socialism is not terminated in them. All the same, people are willing to contemplate pulling up what they know by the roots only if they can have some rational hope, some concrete image, of the alternative. At the beginning of the century, the language of socialism was full of hope, indeed of a perhaps too-naïve scientific guarantee about the future. But the actuality of Stalinism and its aftermath has added the tragic dimension to the language of socialism: the stark possibility of failure. The socialist experiment *can* go wildly and disastrously wrong. It *can* produce a result which is both recognisable as 'socialism' and yet alien to everything intrinsic in our image of what socialism should be like. It can deliver consequences against which socialists may have to stand up and be counted. This is a deep and wounding paradox—and a damaging weakness which every socialist has first to dismantle before he or she can persuade people in good faith to come to our side and assume positions alongside us in the struggle. In our struggle to realise a proper kind of socialism, we have first to explain—not explain away—the *other* kind: the kind where, in the name of the workers' state, the working class is actually shot down in the streets, as is happening at this very moment in Gdansk to Polish Solidarity.

Second, there is a problem about the resilience and buoyancy of

socialist ideas in our time because of the exhaustion which has overtaken the labour movement, especially under the management of Labour **governments** in the past two or three decades. I do not want to talk about the record of those governments in detail. But I want to communicate my overwhelming sense that the collapse of the last Labour government in 1979 was not simply the rotation of political parties in government but the end of a particular political epoch. It was the culmination of a period in which, although there were actually Conservative governments in power some of the time, the framework of ideas being drawn on, the dominant ideas, the consensus, was taken precisely from the social democratic repertoire. Those were ideas to which people had become acclimatised; the taken-for-granted welfare state, mixed economy, incomes' policy, corporatist bargaining and demand management. If you stood up at that time, in a debate on the national economy and tried to justify neo-classical economics, or indeed monetarism, you would have been laughed out of court. Everyone who mattered was one kind of Keynesian or another. Good ideas belonged to the 'Left'. In the sixties and early seventies the Right refused to use the word 'capitalism' at all. Bad old capitalism, they insisted had long gone past. In its place we have something else now, which will help people to, as it were, survive through the dark ages of creeping collectivism. This was the epoch of the social democratic hegemony. That is no longer the case. People talk about 'free-market capitalism' again quite openly. When the Institute for Economic Affairs first started pumping out simple-minded monetarism for the one or two experts in the civil service who still read books, they glossed the capitalist ethic by calling it 'social market values'. They could not actually pronounce the word, 'market', in its full, bare, capitalist form. They had, as it were, to colour it over a bit, soften the blow, by calling it 'social market values'. They don't talk about social market values or the mixed economy any longer. The talk about the market—the good old, hidden hand, Adam Smith market. There are civil servants in Sir Keith Joseph's ministry who are busy reading *The Wealth of Nations*, for the first time. They actually believe in the invisible hand which draws us all involuntarily into the market, produces what everyone needs and pays us what we all deserve and so on. These ancient, pre-industrial pre-historic ideas are capitalist ideas making a late twentieth century reprise to displace those outdated social democratic nostrums about the benevolent state, the national interest, the 'caring society'. Calculating everything according to its pure market value and measuring the national interest in terms of gross self-interest are back in fashion. Even Mr Roy Jenkins and the SDP can't resist the 'new brutalism'.

I don't deny that social democracy helped to make life more humane and tolerable for many in its hey-day in the 1960s and '70s. We have only to bring to mind the alternative—say, Mr Tebbit or Mr Heseltine in

full flow—to find it relatively easy to think kind thoughts about Mr Callaghan, squalid though his last political hours proved to be. But however we assess the differences, it is clear now that those social democratic ideas which seemed to define the age were trapped in their own contradictions. They proved hopelessly inadequate to the crisis which was already confronting the country and whose dimensions have rapidly increased. They were thin ideas in front of a fat, long historical crisis—some, including me, would say a **crisis** which began in the closing decades of the last century, the post-imperialist crisis from which Britain has never in fact recovered. The central illusion—the social democratic illusion, Mark I—to which Labour leaders good, bad and indifferent were attached is that the social democratic bandwagon could be hitched to the star of a reformed capitalism: and that the latter would prove capable of infinite expansion so that all the political constituencies could be 'paid off' at once: the TUC and the CBI, labour and capital, public housing and the private landlord, the miners and the Bank of England. Why worry about the size of your slice relative to the next person's if the size of the cake is constantly expanding?

This social democratic illusion was undermined by the fundamental weaknesses in British industrial capitalism and by the logic of capitalism itself. There simply was not enough expansion in the system after a time to pay off everybody. Besides, it was always an illusion that, by taking into the public economy the industrial infrastructure, you had somehow transformed the logic of profitability and accumulation. This illusion was caught by the scissors of capitalist reality. When the goodies stop rolling in, and you have to choose—under the helpful guidance of the International Monetary Fund—between maintaining living standards and restoring profitability and the managerial prerogative, which is it to be? At that point, an incomes policy ceased to be a recipe for 'planned growth' and instead became a strategy by which a government 'of' the working people polices and disciplines the working class. In the end, under capitalism, the interests of capital and restoring the conditions of expanded accumulation must count first, ahead of the wages and living standards of the people.

When caught in the *logic* of a system, there is no need for conspiratorial theories about leadership sell-outs. If you are inside the logic of a declining capitalism, there are not the extra funds in the kitty to pay off the working class. That is a logic which catches governments of the Left, Right and Centre while they operate inside the capitalist logic. That is why I made such heavy weather, earlier on, about the distinction between socialist ideas and other ideas. It is not a distinction between the good and the bad. It is the distinction between two logics. R.H. Tawney—one of those truly progressive minds whom the Social-Democratic Party are trying to hi-jack, once said that capitalism is not an onion, but a tiger:

'You can peel an onion layer by layer; but you cannot skin a tiger stripe by stripe.' Not a particularly **SDP** sentiment, you may think. Social democracy—I mean, Mark I, when the Labour Party was in power—was no doubt committed, broadly speaking, to improving society in a social democratic way. It chose to reform but not to transform. But British capitalism required not greater humanity but the kiss of life. And, trapped by that remorseless logic, those ideas have gone to the wall. They have disintegrated on us. People are not attracted or powered by them any more. People may be driven back to them because of the horrendous alternative offered by the other side. But that is not a victory for socialist ideas. That is a revulsion against reactionary ideas, which is a very different thing. We could certainly have another Labour government or even a socialist democratic Mark II government next. But whether there will be a government on the basis of a popular and positive mandate for advancing towards socialism is open to doubt. The problem is that the positive commitment to the serious, dangerous and difficult task of unpacking the oldest capitalist system in the world, and beginning to construct some other system without triggering off 'barbarism' will require a great deal of popular will, mobilisation, commitment and nerve. And one of the essential prerequisites for this is the transformation of popular consciousness in a socialist direction. I am not concerned at the moment with prophecies about the exact character and political colouration of the next government. But there is a qualitative difference between advancing towards socialism and another Labour government which comes in on the mandate of the exhausted political ideas of the last two decades.

I have talked about two barriers standing in the way of the advance of socialist ideas. One is the legacy of actual-existing socialism. The second is the historic record of the exhaustion and collapse of the ideas and programmes on which majority Labour governments have taken legitimate power in the state during the post-war period.

But I want to say something about a third inhibition. This is the advance of the Right itself. Since the accession of the Thatcherites to power in the Conservative Party in the **mid-1970s**, I have taken a more gloomy view of the advance of the Right than most other socialists. It may be that I am overstating the case, in which case I may stimulate you into deeper socialist commitment. I think that the radical Right under Thatcherite leadership is very different from any other conservative power base we have seen in the post-war period. I think its ideological penetration into society is very profound. It has shifted the parameters of common sense. It has pioneered a considerable swing towards authoritarian populism and reactionary ideas. It goes deep into the heartland of traditional labour support: skilled workers; working women; young people. Its success is partly the result of the Right, not the Left, *taking ideas seriously*. The radical Right is not hung up on some low-flying

fabrications in this sense. They may be hideously wicked; but they do touch reality, even if they misrepresent its meaning; they have some rational core. The first thing to ask about an organic ideology is not whether it is false but what is true about it. After all, under capitalism, men and women do live their lives and sell their labour, every day, in the market. It has its own materiality; it imposes its gross reality on everyone, whether we like it or not. What Marx suggested was that we cannot unlock the secret of capitalist production, starting from that point: and we cannot supercede the laws of capitalist exploitation until we can surpass the imperatives of market exchange. But he never argued that it does not exist, or that it has no reality or effectivity of its own, or that it is the figment of someone's imagination. Quite the contrary. He showed **how**—without the concept of surplus value, which had to be introduced into the analysis of capitalism since it did not appear on its surface—the laws of market exchange appeared to work only too well. Also, how simple, succinct, elegant a 'mechanism' it was. Also how men and women came to live their whole relation to capitalism within the categories, the spontaneous consciousness, of market relations: 'Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham.' And before you jump to the conclusion that this exhausts its 'rationality' as an effective organiser of demand and supply, we had better ask the Hungarians or the Czechs or ~~the~~ Poles whether or not the idea still has some purchase, some rationality, to it; and how it stands up against the superior rationality of 'The Plan' in actual-existing socialist societies, which have attempted to plan everything from tractors to **hatpins**.

Of course it is possible to reconstruct the market as an ideological construct. Provided—as is always the case in ideology—you play up the good side and repress the negative; provided, that is to say, you do not ask who precisely does, and who does not, benefit from this **kind** of 'freedom'; provided you do not ask who brings unequal power into the equivalences of market exchange, you can set in motion a powerful cluster of ideas which trigger off a positive chain associations—the market = free choice = Freedom and Liberty = anti-statism = 'put an end to Creeping Collectivism'! Even in the era of corporatism and state capitalism, of giant corporations and multinationals, it is still possible for people to 'make sense' of their experience within the categories of market 'Freedom and Choice'.

One of the most important features of the radical Right in the period between **1975** and **1979** was the degree to which its protagonists grasped the argument that there was no point taking political power with a **radical**-reactionary programme unless they had already won the ideological terrain. And they set about doing just that. One could contrast that with the Labour policy towards, for example, immigration. Labour's conscience may be in the right place if a little faint, about immigration. But, without

the preparatory politics which confronts indigenous working class racism, without the means of ideological struggle which allows you to set your own agenda vis-a-vis racism, without a politics which confronts racism and prepares—educates—people for legislation which will positively favour an anti-racist policy, Labour 'takes office'—a different thing from 'taking power'. Then it sticks the political thermometer into peoples' mouths and its social democratic conscience is shocked and astonished to discover that the fever of racism is actually running quite high in society, not least in local Labour clubs and parties. There is nothing for it but to cut the problem off at the source: thus, immigration controls. If you do not prepare for political power, ideologically you will find the weight of popular ideas stacked against change and your freedom of action constrained by the nature of the existing terrain.

Between 1975 and 1979 an effective ideological crusade was waged by the radical Right. This was not a simple 'Vote for Mrs Thatcher' propaganda campaign. It was an attempt to penetrate to some of the core, root social ideas in the population. They seized on the notion of freedom. They marked it off from equality. They contrasted it against a dim and dingy statism which they chained to the idea of social democracy in power. 'Freedom' is one of the most powerful, but slippery, ideas in the political vocabulary: it is a term which can be inserted into several different political discourses. The language of freedom is a rivetingly powerful one but it contains many contradictory ideas. And somehow the Right persuaded ordinary people that rather than everyone sinking into a morass of social democratic mediocrity it might be better for them to take their chances, as the British people have before now, and make a break for it. Take your chance in the market for education; don't let your children fall behind. Take your chance in the free market for housing; don't wait until the housing list slowly goes down. Take your chance in the market for jobs. The slow wait, the long queue, the people who don't count, the people who don't care, the people behind desks who know how to fill out forms but are uninterested in human problems—that's socialism! Where is the ancient instinct for human freedom which the British psyche has long nourished? The instinct to compete and survive, to get up and go? This ancient instinct is called possessive individualism. I am not so sure that it is printed in the genes of free-born Anglo-Saxons. It is certainly one of the root-ideas of capitalism. Without the ethic of possessive individualism, capitalism would never have taken off. But, old ideas weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living. At the end of the twentieth century there still are political languages which can bring ordinary working people out into the streets in favour of that notion of possessively individually choosing their own future. Some of these powerful connections have been made active again in the language of the radical Right. They have seized on a number of powerful ideas, indeed positive slogans,

which touch deep historical chords. They have transformed them to their own political purposes. They are ideas which have gained once more a powerful currency in our society.

I have talked very negatively so far about what is making it so difficult for socialist ideas. Let me now look briefly at *some* of the areas in which it seems to me a battle has to be joined for socialist ideas. By socialist ideas here you may be surprised to find I am not going to talk about programmatic ideas, like nationalisation and public ownership and so on, important though they are. I am talking about *root* ideas: the social ideas on which the socialist programme or socialist politics must be based. Let me, for instance, talk about the idea of the nation, the people, the British people. No political counter has proved so effective, such a guarantee of popular mobilisation as being able to say 'the people think. . .'. 'Conjuring yourself into 'the people' is the true ventriloquism of populist politics. Political leaders who claim to have no ideas of their own: they just reflect what 'the people', out there, think. . . 'The people' out there are, of course, varied; different; divided by gender, sex, class and race. They are free-traders, rate-payers, low taxers, wild Trotskyists and flat-earth monetarists: they are wife and mother, lover, part-time worker and madonna of the sink all in one and the same person. The politics of *populism* is to construct all of them into a composite political identity so that the divisions of class and interest or the divisions of role and person count for less than the unity, the undifferentiated, unclassed, unsexed, unraced unity of 'the people'. Then you must perform the second ideological trick: which is to project 'the people' back as far as they can go, in a bid for the history of the British people. 'The people', you will find have really *always* existed since at least Anglo Saxon times, or Magna Carta and perhaps before that. These reactionary ideas constitute the essence of 'Englishness'. The British people have *always* been like that. God made them like that and for that purpose, with an instinct for possessive individualism, private property, respect for authority, the constitution, the law and the nuclear family and so on. One cannot go against the grain of history. This ideological construct—'the people'—has been much in evidence since 1975. It was in evidence during the 'winter of discontent', when the discourse of the radical Right successfully counterposed the working class *against* the people. Within this ideological framework the politicised sectors of the working class are represented as nothing more than a narrow interest group. While, out there, are the people—who may well, of course, be the sectional group 'holding the nation up to ransom' in some *other* dispute. Nevertheless, they come to see themselves, to position themselves, as simple, uninvolved, depoliticised commuters: 'the people' who can't get home, who can't bury their dead, who can't shop, can't catch any trains or can't get hospital treatment. Who is causing all this? The workers. The

unions. The leadership. Or the Left. The Marxists. The Trots. Somebody. Some other, tiny group of politically-motivated militants is standing in the way of 'what the people want': or, as Mr Heath once felicitously called them, 'The Great Trade Union of the Nation'. Now the astonishing political fact that the people can be colonised by the Right, has in part to do with the fact that there is no alternative vision of what or who the people are. On the Left and in the labour movement, we have lost our sense of history. So that, when something like the Falklands crisis blows up, history belongs to the Right. Freedom of speech, of assembly, the franchise etc., the things we took to the high seas to defend have only been won in our society as a result of the prolonged struggle of working people. That is what democracy actually is. But how is it represented in popular history, in popular memory? As the gift of the rulers. Somehow, democracy 'came'. It descended from heaven. It is part of the great Anglo-Saxon inheritance or the Magna Carta decrees or something. There are thousands of young people who do not know that without a civil war and a king walking around with his head lopped off, there would be no so-called parliamentary tradition to speak of, no constitutionalism for Mr Foot to nail his colour to. Without people besieging Hyde Park and Trafalgar Square in a thoroughly extra-parliamentary fashion there would be no such thing as the right of public assembly. Without the radical press there would be no such thing as Mr Murdoch's right to report what was said about him in parliament let alone to command the channels of public communication. Democracy is what working people have made it: neither more or less. Yet the people can only speak and act in history through their representative from Grantham. The **Grantham** corner shop has become the sum and crystallisation of the whole, so-called democratic process. That is because we have evacuated our own history. We are going to fight Mr Tebbit's anti-trade union Bill without the vast majority of workers knowing when the right to strike was won, or how, or who stood against it, and for how long.

It is not only people in the labour movement who do not know their own history. But, certain absolutely root ideas without which socialism cannot survive have been allowed to wither and atrophy in the past two decades. Consider the **notion** of equality. What we have at the moment is a phoney argument between freedom and equality which the Right has effectively posed as a choice: if you want everybody to be equal, then that will be at the expense of their liberty. And since, as I have said we are a freedom-loving people at least from Magna Carta onwards, we will not tolerate that, so we have to sacrifice equality in order to defend freedom. **Either/or**. Against that, where does the notion of equality stand as an unqualified, basic socialist idea with a sense behind it of the deep, persistent, ineradicable inequalities of life in our society? Who speaks today of the way in which capital, wealth, property, status,

authority, social power and respect are riven by the divisions between the 'haves' and the 'have **nots**'? There may be problems about everybody being absolutely equal in the future. I leave that discussion to the future of socialism. But I want to **reaffirm** that to be ardent for socialism and lukewarm about the notion of equality is a living contradiction. Yet very few people these days speak the radical language of the politics of equality: the politics not just of the redistribution of goods and resources, but of the fundamental equality of condition. The language of equality used to be an absolutely root vocabulary for socialists. Different socialists of different schools spoke it in different ways, but socialism was unthinkable without this notion of destroying the bastions of accumulated privilege of a social and political and cultural kind. The assumption that we could advance the ideas of socialism without rethinking what equality now means in an advanced industrial society is, I think, untenable.

Let me talk about another rather different idea—one that now belongs, as it were, to the other side: the idea of tradition and traditionalism. I remember the moment in the 1979 election when Mr Callaghan, on his last political legs, so to speak, said with real astonishment about the offensive of Mrs Thatcher, 'She means to tear society up by the roots.' This was an unthinkable idea in the social democratic vocabulary: a radical attack on the status quo. The truth is that, traditionalist ideas, the ideas of social and moral respectability, have penetrated so deep inside socialist consciousness that it is quite common to find people committed to a radical political programme, underpinned by wholly traditional feelings and sentiments.

This is a movement without a strong republican secularist **tradition**—socialists without a strong commitment to the ending of the obfuscations of monarchical privilege and ritual. This is a socialist movement which has not committed itself—in general, metaphorical terms, of course—to Voltaire's fond ambition to strangle the last king with the entrails of the last priest. I am not suggesting a witch hunt of Christian socialists or indeed of socialists who believe in the monarchy. But it amazes me that the thrust of the socialist movement should not be pitted unremittingly against a society whose forms are held in place by the rituals of rank, respect and deference. Because our definition of 'the political' is so narrow, restricted and constitutionalist, we do not seem capable of understanding the ideological cement in the crevices of the social system represented by those lines of deference and authority. Already at the end of the eighteenth century, always in the forefront of the programme of the bourgeois revolution—let alone, of socialism—was the notion of 'the bourgeois republic'. Yet here we are, socialists at the end of the twentieth century, jacking ourselves up occasionally, when we are feeling particularly bold, into the odd republican remark. Traditionalism, in the social sense, has a deep and profound hold inside the socialist movement, inside the

labour movement, inside the working class itself. That is why and where racism and sexism lurk. Traditionalism provides these with the roots on which they continue to feed, inside the minds and consciousness and allegiances of working people. But a socialism which hopes to construct itself on the back of a class committed to the secondary position of blacks and the secondary position of women in the scheme of things, will not transform society. It may reform it, modernise it, and improve it in some ways. But it cannot pick society up by the roots and change the relations in which people live. Indeed, a socialism which has a political programme but does not include in its perspective the questioning of those social and moral ideas and relationships, which does not understand the connection between how people live in families, how men and women relate to one another and what kinds of societies they build, is a socialism which will remain 'backward'. It will remain captured, caught, in the net of the respectability and traditionalism of ancient ideas. For politics are rooted in social relations, not just in a programme of political targets. Socialists must penetrate to the ground, the place, where radical social ideas can be brought into connection with the traditional institutions of the labour movement and transform them into a new kind of politics. That is a different sort of struggle for socialist ideas than the labour movement has traditionally had on its agenda.

Let me conclude. I talked first of all about what I think are some of the principal inhibitions to the advance of socialist ideas. The problems that stand in the way of getting socialist ideas rolling again as a popular force in society. I think they are profound. I think one has to confront them head on—but with **ã socialism** which is without guarantees. That is to say which does not believe that the motor of history is inevitably on its side. One has to fasten one's mind, as **Gramsci** said 'violently' onto things as they are: including, if things are not too good, the fact that they are not too good. . . . So that is why I started with the negative. In the more positive part, I have tried to talk about where socialism needs to begin to grow again. Not yet in terms of programmatic demands but, in terms of the root values, the root concepts, the root images and ideas in popular consciousness, without which no popular socialism can be constructed. If you have working people committed to the old ways, the old relations, the old values, the old feelings, they may vote for this and that particular reform but they will have no long term commitment to the hard graft of transforming society. And unless socialists understand the strategic role of this level of struggle—the struggle to command the common sense of the age in order to educate and transform it, to make common sense, the ordinary everyday thoughts of the majority of the population, move in a socialist rather than a reactionary direction, then our hearts may be in the right place but our relation to the task of putting socialism back on the historical agenda again is not all that different from

that of the besieging armies at the city of Jericho who hoped that seven times round the city wall, a blast on the trumpet and a quick prayer to the gods would bring that ancient 'Winter Palace' tumbling to the ground.