In Spite of History? New Leftism in Britain 1956 - 1979

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to challenge a prevailing historiographical consensus that tends to view the experience of the British New Left from the late 1950s as one of general 'failure'. Such characterisations, it is argued, rest on a fundamental misreading of the New Left's founding pluralist agenda.

Citing the movement's origins amidst the 'conjunctural' crises of 1956, the thesis argues that 'new leftism' in Britain should be approached less as an attempt to construct an *alternative* political, ideological, or theoretical position (as opposed to Stalinism or social democracy), than as an effort to establish a series of orientating principles through which a new generation of socialists might come to apprehend a world in which the ideological or theoretical assumptions of the past no longer appeared to hold. In this sense, the thesis suggests, new leftists can be understood as having been amongst the first intellectuals in Britain to both recognise and negotiate the burgeoning 'post-modernist' paradigm in the post-war era.

The thesis demonstrates how in its earliest phase the New Left displayed considerable reticence about its 'movementist' identity, preferring instead to promote itself as reflecting 'a frame of mind', and 'a mood rather than a movement'. Above all, it is argued, the New Left was premised on the insistence that any meaningful renewal of the 'socialist-humanist' project would require a period of sustained 'theoretical humility', 'a permanent openness', and the creation of a cultural and intellectual 'third space' in which free-inquiry and open-ended discussion could proceed without inhibition. In this sense, the thesis argues that British new leftism was considerably more successful than has hitherto generally been acknowledged, helping to carve out, amongst other things, much of the intellectual and cultural terrain upon which some of the most significant social and cultural transformations of the latter half of the twentieth century took place.

In Spite of History: New Leftism in Britain 1956 – 1979

Introduction

[The twentieth century] will never be understood unless we can both comprehend the motivations of those who took part in the wars of secular religion which devastated so much of it, and to stand back from their assumptions far enough to see them skeptically and in perspective.

> Eric Hobsbawm, 'Preface', in the US Paperback Edition of *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (New York, 2005), p. *xiii.*

Nostalgia is a very second-order emotion. It's not a real emotion. What nostalgia does is what the realist in a sense does with what is in front of him; the nostalgiac looks at the past and keeps it there, which is what is dangerous about nostalgia, which is why it's a very English disease in a way… [L]ooking back is part and parcel of our political language. But I'm not dealing in nostalgia. I think that if you [don't] have an alert awareness of the immediate past, then what you are doing is being complicit in the orthodoxy of the present, totally, and I am sometimes amused to be berated, to see myself berated as one who uses nostalgia, and this is not the case.

> Dennis Potter, 'An Interview with Alan Yentob, BBC 2' (1987), reprinted in *Seeing the Blossom: Two Interviews, a Lecture and a Story* (London, 1994), p. 67.

History is a form within which we fight, and many have fought before us. Nor are we alone when we fight there. For the past is not just dead, inert, confining; it carries signs and evidences also of creative resources which can sustain the present and prefigure possibility.

> E. P. Thompson, 'The Politics of Theory' in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory*, (London, 1981), pp. 407 – 408.

It is sometimes overlooked that historians of the very recent past invariably have a more problematic task than those who cast their gaze further afield: not only is it perhaps unwise to commence sweeping-up at any time before the 'dust' has finally settled, but, as George Orwell reminds us, 'to see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle.'[1] In contrast, the greater the distance that stands between us and our chosen object of study the more licence our imaginations are granted to fill the intervening space with alternative meanings and interpretations – not least, those

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[1] George Orwell, 'In Front of Your Nose' in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* (London, 1968), p. 167. 'Dust' here is meant in a similar sense as that used by Carolyn Steedman to represent 'the immutable, obdurate set of beliefs about the material world, past and present, inherited from the nineteenth century, with which modern history-writing attempts to grapple.' (Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester 2001), p. *ix.*)

which may somehow serve to assist or assuage us within the maelstrom of our more pressing contemporary predicaments.[2] It is perhaps for this reason, therefore, that as the great nineteenth-century essayist, William Hazlitt, once observed, distant objects also *please*:

> Time takes out the sting of pain; our sorrows after a certain period have been so often steeped in a medium of thought and passion, that they 'unmould their essence;' and all that remains of our original impressions is what we would wish them to have been… Seen in the distance, in the long perspective of waning years, the meanest incidents enlarged and enriched by countless recollections, become interesting; the most painful, broken and softened by time, soothe.[3]

If *perspective* is one of the watchwords of the historian, we can only hope that *evidence* still stands as another – though here, paradoxically, in the struggle to affect the appearance of the former, *less* may sometimes seem like *more*. As it is, every historian is to some extent condemned to live in fear of himself (or, worse still, *another* historian) discovering some previously overlooked document or artefact that just so happens to discount the entire conceptual or theoretical foundation on which his life's work has hitherto been based. The production of history is necessarily predicated on selection, which also means exclusion; thus it follows that the less one is obliged to consider the less one risks overlooking. It was recognition of this paradox that once led Lytton Strachey to ironically observe of the Victorian era that its history could never be written precisely because we already 'know *too much* about it'.[4] Strachey was, of course, writing towards the end of World War I, less than two decades after Queen Victoria's death, and, therefore, could not have anticipated the ensuing flood, which has since come to constitute 'Victorian Studies' in academic departments around the globe; nevertheless, the admonitory pith of his observation

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[2] Pierre Nora, for example, famously argues that the past, in all its multiple dimensions, is always determined and filtered through the rubric of the contemporary moment (Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History': *Les Lieux de Memoire*, in *Representations*, No. 26 (1989); or as Primo Levi observed shortly before his death: 'The further events fade into the past, the more the construction of convenient truth grows and is perfected.' (Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London,, 1988) p. 27.)

[3] William Hazlitt, 'Why Distant Objects Please', in William Hazlitt, *Selected Writings* (London,, 1970), pp. 149 – 150.

[4] Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (London,, 1918), p. vii.

still pertains: in our struggle to perceive an authentic picture of the past, invariably, the more that is revealed the harder it becomes to see.

In our efforts to apprehend the major social, political and cultural transformations that occurred during the latter half of the twentieth century, the historiographical paradox described above seems particularly pronounced: not only might it be claimed that the 'shadows' cast by the last century still loom sufficiently large as to make any move towards historicisation seem a precarious, if not a *premature*, exercise, but the sheer mass of available (and seemingly ever-proliferating) source material ('letters', 'surveillance reports', 'court files', 'opinion polls', 'memoranda', 'diaries', 'novels', 'autobiographies', 'speeches', 'personal testimonies', audio and film recordings, photographs, magazines, digital archives) to which any self-respecting historian is now obliged to attend appears to render the possibility of any satisfactory 'overview' emerging, even at some appropriately 'distant' point in the future, a practical, if not a *human*, impossibility.[5] It is perhaps not surprising then to find a number of recent reflections on the 'future of British history' appearing to suggest a pulling away from the grand 'totalising' ambitions of the past in favour of more modest, or 'pragmatic', historiographical aims and agendas. Thus as the editors of a recent collection of articles exploring some of the major *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (2011) observe: [6]

> In place of the ambition for a 'total' social history, the emphasis is now very much on the reconstruction of the 'social' at the micro level: on the crucial analysis of the small-scale and the immediate – on how human beings interact with each other and

[5] My list of the various kinds of primary source material is derived from Miriam Dobson and Benjamin Ziemann, *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from 19th and 20th Century History* (Abingdon 2009). As Owen Holland and Eoin Phillips have recently noted, we are now nearing a stage where even '[t]he valuable ephemerality of unrecorded conversation is, perhaps for the first time, under threat. Everything must be archived and held in digital aspic: lectures, seminars, blogs, MOOCS (Massive Online Open Courses).' As Holland and Phillips conclude, it is perhaps still to soon to tell whether this ensuing future is indicative of a 'post-structuralist paradise: proliferation in every direction', or 'actually a crisis of overproduction'. (Owen Holland & Eoin Phillips, 'Fifty Years of E. P. Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class: Some Field Notes', in *Social History*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Summer, 2014), p. 181.)

[6] See, for example, 'Roundtable: Twentieth-century British History in North America' in *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2010), pp. 375 – 418; David Feldman and Jon Lawrence's 'Introduction' to their jointly edited collection *Structures and Transformations in British History* (Cambridge 2011), pp. 1 – 23; and the subsequent responses, in *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (Autumn 2011), from: Martin Daunton, 'The Future Direction of British History: Thinking About Economic Cultures', pp. 222 – 239; Catherine Hall, 'The State of Modern British History' in, pp. 205 – 211; Frank Mort, 'Intellectual Pluralism and the Future of British History', pp. 212 – 221.

with the material world… [T]here is much less confidence that a holistic picture can be constructed from the fragments of the past. Much of this work now eschews speculating on connections between the social and the political, although particularly among the more empirically minded there remains an underlying emphasis on the determining role of material life.[7]

For some practitioners such developments must be seen as just one outcome of 'the increasingly pluralist agenda of modern history over the past quarter of a century', and the parallel 'redefinition of a field that was originally more comfortable with political and cultural versions of national belonging'.[8] Moreover, to this extent, it is suggested, we should perhaps be wary of conceiving such trends as somehow diminishing, let alone portentous of (yet) another impending 'crisis in the field'; thus responding to the rather more 'anxious' tone coming from certain American colleagues, Frank Mort has cautioned against those who would portray 'the demand for new integrative problematics' and the hard-won 'intellectual energies within modern British history' as 'polarized opposites.'[9] As Mort points out, '[t]he move from macro to micro investigation', and the more diverse 'intellectual agendas' of recent years have both had hugely generative effects on a discipline whose long-term prospects, at certain junctures of the twentieth century, often seemed far from certain; moreover, in the process, the best work of recent years has done much to undermine the complacent 'claims for clear causalities in favour of exploring 'patterns of interconnection' and lines of convergence and divergence – between politics and culture, elites and subalterns, society and economy – conceived of as fluid processes rather than as fixed structures.'[10]

Yet whilst it can be agreed that the epistemological shifts of the past three decades have undoubtedly yielded diverse new pathways and interpretative possibilities for both historians and historical work, it is not clear that we are any closer to overcoming what Mort himself describes as, 'the difficulty of mapping the defining

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[7] Feldman & Lawrence, 'Introduction', pp. 8 – 9.
[8] Mort, 'Intellectual Pluralism and the State of Modern British History', pp. 212 – 213.
[9] Ibid, p. 214. Amongst the roundtable's discussants Susan Pedersen had intoned: 'I am not saying that we need a canon, exactly, but we could really use (and our students still more would benefit from) a set of competing, strong, partial, integrative frameworks for our field.' (Susan Pedersen, 'Roundtable', p. 395.)
[10] Mort, 'Intellectual Pluralism and the State of Modern British History', p. 213.

features of a field that has become increasingly pluralized and heterogeneous.'[11] As James Vernon observes, the problem is not so much 'the absence of good work on [twentieth-century Britain], far from it, but an uncertainty about how to situate it in a broader account of British, European or global history.'[12]

On the Trail of the New Left

Over the last two decades the evolutionary development of the British New Left from the late 1950s through to the end of the 1970s has emerged as the subject of a growing amount of critical and scholarly attention. Since 1993 and the appearance of Lin Chun's *The British New Left*, at least three other book-length studies have appeared, as well as numerous scholarly articles elucidating one or other aspect of the 'movement's' political and intellectual significance. Whilst some accounts have traced the relationship between the early New Left and the emergence of Cultural Studies in the early 1960s;[13] others have concentrated on the way that strategic and theoretical divergences between more or less distinct new-left generations presaged the so-called 'theory wars' of the 1970s and 1980s.[14] In the process, much of this work has also attempted – with varying degrees of success – to advance British New Left history as a largely untapped reservoir of political and intellectual discussion and debate, and as 'a vitally important resource in the study of the development of post-war British political thought.'[15]

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[11] Ibid., p. 214.

[12] James Vernon, 'Roundtable', p. 405.

[13] See, for example, Ioan Davies, *Cultural Studies and Beyond: Fragments of Empire* (London, & New York 1995), Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham and London, 1997), Tom Steele, *The Emergence of Cultural Studies 1945 - 65: Cultural Politics, Adult Education and the English Question* (London, 1997), Richard E. Lee, *Life and Times of Cultural Studies: The Politics and Transformation of the Structures of Knowledge* (Durham, NC, 2003); Simon During, 'Socialist Ends: The British New Left, Cultural Studies and the Emergence of Academic Theory' in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2007), pp. 23 – 39.

[14] See, for example, Paul Blackledge, *Perry Anderson: Marxism and the New Left* (London, 2004) & 'The New Left's Renewal of Marxism', in *International Socialism*, No. 112 (October 2006), pp. 125 – 153; Madeleine Davis, 'The Marxism of the British New Left' in *The Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (October 2006); Scott Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory: E. P. Thompson, the New Left and Postwar British Politics* (Manchester 2011); Alastair J. Reid, 'The Dialectics of Liberation: The Old Left, The New Left and the Counter-Culture', in David Feldman and John Lawrence (eds.), *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History* (Cambridge 2011), pp. 261 – 280.

[15] For overviews of the more strictly organisational and institutional mutations of the New Left, see Lin Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh 1993); Michael Kenny, *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London, 1995); Duncan Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect? A History of New Left Review* (Monmouth 2007); and Wade Matthews, *The New Left, National Identity, and the*

It is not the least irony contained within this convoluted political, cultural and intellectual history that an *intervention* which was, at least initially, compelled by a desire to open-up, or *liberate*, political and intellectual discourse in Britain, has, in the three or four decades since its eclipse, often been closed-down, (if not shut-out altogether) by the very kinds of discursive possibilities and practices it helped to legitimate. Indeed, more than once, the New Left has found itself on the receiving end of what one of its own principal exponents once famously identified as 'the enormous condescension of posterity.'[16]

Arguably, the generation of historians who came to maturity either during, or in the immediate aftermath of the various political and cultural revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s were not always best placed to gauge their wider historical meaning or significance; if nothing else, an enduring sense of despondency (or *nausea*) at the deleterious acrimony which had been seen to accompany the death throes of 'high-sixties'' idealism, continued to act as a powerful disincentive against anyone who might have been inclined to believe that something of value still remained to be salvaged from the corpse.[17] In the same period, the perceived political blindside of 'Thatcherism', and parallel recognition of 'new times' politics, seemed to further diminish both the will and the pertinence of looking back on what by that point appeared to many as the catastrophically misplaced ambitions and assumptions of the past.[18] Notably, the two major exceptions to these trends – a 1987 Oxford conference

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Break-Up of Britain (London 2013). Madeleine Davis, *The British New Left and its Legacy: Advance, Retreat or Defeat?* is scheduled for publication in 2015.

[16] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, (London, 1963), p. 13. For example, as Jenny Turner, in her review of Kenny's *The First New Left* suggested in 1995: 'Many of the new left's key ideas may seem, from the sophisticated 1990s New Labour standpoint, just as bizarre again. It's not just the sentimental attempt to find an inherently socialist strand in English history… It's more the luxury of it all, of academics making their hot air, secure in the knowledge that higher education is expanding; of theorists building their fancy castles, comfy in the belief that there will always be an audience for them with world enough and time.' Jenny Turner, 'Left In and Out of History', in *The Guardian* (June 30th 1995), p. 6.

[17] As the critic R. W. Johnson suggested in 1990: 'In the new, post-Communist world of the 1990s the Left has much hard thinking to do – about its own roots and identity as well as about where it goes from here. The inspiration that can be gained from a backward look to the heroes of the Sixties has now a merely nostalgic quality to it.' (R. W. Johnson, 'Moooovement', in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (February 8th 1990), p. 6.)

[18] See particularly, Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London,, 1988); and Stuart Hall & Martin Jacques (eds.), *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s* (London, 1989). For a sense of how far the high-tide of radical Sixties' hopes had retracted by the late 1980s see, Jonathan Green (ed.), *Days in the Life: Voices from the English*

in which some of the early New Left's founding figures came together in order to assess the movement's significance after three decades, and Lisa Jardine's and Julia Swindell's *What's Left? Women in Culture and the Labour Movement* (1990) – both appeared to suggest that, at least, some wounds were still sufficiently raw as to preclude the possibility of even the most tentative consensual agreement emerging. Finally, the relatively premature deaths of Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson, and Raphael Samuel, in 1988, 1993, and 1996 respectively, seemed to serve as a final closure. Some of the obituaries, it could be noted, registered the loss not only of a certain kind of British 'public intellectual', but also the more optimistic (or, *innocent*) epoch such figures had presided over.

It is perhaps telling, then, that the first scholars to attempt full-blown *historical* assessments of the New Left in Britain came not from 'history', but from 'politics' departments. In Lin Chun's case, her experience of growing up outside the 'peculiar' national cultural framework in which the New Left had first been obliged to distinguish itself, almost certainly helped to produce a study that was refreshingly free of the pernicious political and ideological sectarianism that had blighted most other critical assessments of the New Left up to that point.[19] If, however, it did much to aid Chun's grasp of the New Left's place within the wider constellation of post-war British 'cultural politics' and history is far less clear.[20] Indeed, as a would-be *comprehensive* account of the British movement's distinctive character and significance, Chun's analysis seemed strangely attenuated: crucial associations and allusions went unarticulated; distinctive idioms of thought and communication

Underground 1961 – 1971 (London,, 1988); Sara Maitland (ed.), *Very Heaven: Looking Back at the 1960s* (London,, 1988); and Michelene Wandor (ed.), *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation* (London,, 1990). As Sheila Rowbotham would later recall the prevailing mood: 'It was partly a matter of incomprehension, partly confusion because some aspects of the libertarian left-wing case, such as the suspicion of the state, were incorporated into the New Conservatism. The assumed meanings of 'alternative', 'independent', indeed of 'socialism', were to be gradually emptied, a process accompanied by a *peculiar forgetfulness*, as if it were too painful to remember what had been hoped for.' (Rowbotham, *Looking at Class*, p. 15)

[19] See, for example, Duncan Hallas, 'How Do We Move On?' in *Socialist Register*, Vol. 14 (1977), pp. 1 – 10. In a rather transparent attempt to advance the case of the recently renamed, Socialist Worker's Party, Hallas opined that the sum experience of the New Left was to have demonstrated 'that there is no possibility of now creating a significant party which does not have clear and unequivocal commitment to revolutionary socialist politics. There is really no middle of the road.' (p. 8)

[20] As Chun herself later acknowledged: 'I frequently worked from common-sense knowlegde of a culture which was nonetheless unfamiliar to me, and sometimes got hung up on trivial details.' (Lin Chun, 'Reply to Dorothy Thompson and Fred Inglis' in *New Left Review*, No. 219 (September-October 1996), p. 133).

appeared to have been misinterpreted, or, in some cases, overlooked altogether. If nothing else, and as Geoff Eley concluded his review in *Left History*, '[to have written] the history of the New Left without sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll… [seemed] a peculiarly funless trip.'[21] As it was, within two years a second study had emerged, this time focusing on what its author, Michael Kenny, unambiguously identified as *The First New Left* (1995). Whilst Kenny's account served to address some of the characteristic lacunae of Chun's initial effort it, the book's primary interest in what Kenny himself described as 'the political dimensions of the early New Left's project', ensured that at least some readers were left with a similar sense of attenuation.[22]

More recently, Madeleine Davis has attempted to reframe the British New Left as a 'primarily intellectual' attempt to work through, offset, anticipate some of the contradictions and shortfalls of Marxist theory'.[23] In the process, Davis has further suggested that 'the transition of 1962-1963 is better regarded as a shift of emphasis than a break', whilst also adding that 'distinctions between 'first' and 'second' New Lefts must be [considered] as unhelpful for an appreciation of the British New Left as a whole'.[24] In this generally welcome attempt to advance New Left historiography beyond 'conventional assumptions', not least, 'the tendency to view its development in terms of two distinct 'generations'', Davis finds that 'a common New Left project' did exist, 'in relation to Marxism in the sense that *all* its various intellectual strands were concerned, in different ways, to articulate and address problems in and around Marxism that 1956 and its aftermath threw up.'[25] Nevertheless, whilst it can certainly be agreed that Marxism remained a major orientating influence on all phases of British new-left activity from the late 1950s through to the end of the 1970s, it should also be noted that it was invariably the struggle of new leftists to *move beyond* what they encountered as the characteristic lacunae of Marxism, often by drawing on resources considered far outside the established Marxian purview, that gave the movement its distinctive identity; indeed, arguably, D. H. Lawrence was as important to the early New Left sensibility as the author of *Capital*! As it is, Davis's characterisation must ultimately depend on downplaying, not only the profoundly

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[21] Geoff Eley, 'Review: Lin Chun, *The British New Left* (Edinburgh 1993)' in *Left History*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1994), p. 124.
[22] Kenny, *The First New Left*, p. 4.
[23] Davis, 'The Marxism of the British New Left', p. 337.
[24] Ibid., p. 339.
[25] Ibid., p. 336.

ambivalent contemporary attitude towards Marxism of founding fathers such as E. P. Thompson, Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, but also the overt *anti*-Marxism of figures such as Charles Taylor and Richard Hoggart.[26] As Thompson himself later described, far from being prompted by a desire to rescue or revivify Marxism, the early New Left's 'agenda', 'entailed the strong probability that Marxism itself stood in need of radical scrutiny, and that it would never be adequate to ravel it up again into a better *system*'; indeed, for those like Thompson, '[i]t was exactly the notion of Marxism as a self-sufficient theoretical Sum which constituted the essence of the metaphysical heresy against reason, and which inhibited the active investigation of the world within the developing, provisional, and self-critical tradition of historical materialism.'[27]

The overwhelmingly 'political', or 'intellectual', emphases of the recent work carried out on the New Left appears to betray a sense on the part of its authors that somewhere within its diffuse history might lie some kernel – the missing 'key' or 'signpost' – which, if only it could be recovered, may somehow lead to the revivification of left-wing, even *socialist*, ideas and perspectives in mainstream British political and cultural life. Chun, for example, prefaced her 1993 study with the claim that 'reviewing the lessons of the New Left may help us with the difficult task of recasting socialism in the years to come'; more recently Paul Blackledge has insisted, 'the contemporary left has perhaps much to learn from the failure of the first New Left to capitalize on its early achievements';[28] Scott Hamilton asserts that, '[i]f twenty-first century socialists want to avoid repeating the errors of the twentieth century, then they have much to learn from E. P. Thompson [and the New Left];'[29] finally, in the last few years both Davis and Kenny have joined forces with politicians associated with the so-called 'Blue' and 'One Nation' tendencies in the British Labour Party, with a view to advancing 'the [early] New Left as a source for Labour's

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[26] As E. P. Thompson pointed out to Richard Johnson in 1979: 'In the mid-1950s Richard Hoggart's attitude to Marxism was one of explicit hostility, Raymond Williams's was one of active critique, Stuart Hall's… one of sceptical ambivalence' (E. P. Thompson, 'The Politics of Theory', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981), p. 396.)

[27] E. P. Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory: or an Orrery of Errors', in E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London, 1978), p. 375.

[28] Paul Blackledge, 'Learning from Defeat: Reform, Revolution and the Problem of Organization in the First New Left' in *Contemporary Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (March, 2004), p. 21.

[29] Hamilton, *The Crisis of Theory*, p. 6.

ideological renewal.'[30] It is testimony to the depth and richness of the New Left's political analyses and proscriptions that those who have set out to recover such would-be political panaceas have invariably been able to find them. Yet, to isolate, or abstract, one aspect of the early New Left's diverse moral, philosophical cultural, social *and* political agenda, albeit a major one, must be considered a peculiar way of trying to grasp the meaning and significance of a movement whose foundational appeal always rested on the claim that it 'neither beg[an] nor end[ed] with the terms of politics as now ordinarily defined.'[31]

However, with that said, it was, from early on, the tendency amongst those who sought to understand it, to approach the New Left as a more or less orthodox *political* 'movement', that ensured its exponents always struggled to assert its distinct identity and agenda. Thus, writing in 1960, Thompson observed how much of the contemporary confusion surrounding the New Left stemmed from the fact that most of its 'critics' were still unable to 'shake sufficiently free of traditional ways of thinking', let alone, to 'conceive of new forms of class consciousness arising both more consonant with changed reality and more revolutionary in implication.'[32] Indeed, in Thompson's view, it was the New Left's '[insistence] upon the connections between the structure and the fittings, between the architect and the builder and the people who live within', that provided the early phase of the movement with its distinctive *revolutionary* mandate:

> What is proving indigestible is our insistence that none of these things can be taken separately: that socialists must confront the capitalist system, where the Bomb is endorsed by the media, which are upheld by advertisements, which stem from private concentrations of power, which exploit people both as producers and consumers, by creating a mental environment which fosters acquisitive and impoverishes community values in such a way that traditional working-class consciousness appears

[30] Madeleine Davis, 'Editorial: Can One Nation Labour Learn from the British New Left?', in *Renewal: A Journal of Social Democracy*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2013), p. 5. This has also entailed a recent online reissue, through the journal *Soundings*, of the text of the 1968 edition of the *May Day Manifesto*, incorporating a new introduction by Michael Rustin.
[31] Raymond Williams, *Towards Socialism*, p. 367
[32] Thompson, 'Revolution Again!', p. 24.

to be eroding… with the assistance of [the Labour Party's] capitulation to the Bomb and to the psephelogical arguments of adaptation.[33]

Thus, as previous scholars with the temerity (or foolhardiness) to enter into this highly contested zone have soon discovered: 'there is little agreement on how to define the British New Left… it is almost impossible to separate questions of definition from questions of interpretation';[34] 'The New Left does not fit easily into the categories and disciplinary boundaries of the modern academy', [35] neither can it 'be defined solely in organisational terms.' [36] In an excoriating, and revealingly *impatient*, commentary on the separate offerings by Chun and Kenny in the mid-1990s, Dorothy Thompson reprimanded both authors for, amongst other things, their failure to evoke the political, cultural and intellectual context out of which the very idea of a *new* left intervention first came to be articulated ('neither is the work of a historian').[37] Singling out Kenny for particular opprobrium, Thompson inveighed against what she saw as the author's 'unstated set of assumptions about what the movement was', his 'many misreadings of personalities', and 'lack of understanding of those elements in the British communist tradition that cannot be considered as theoretical statements.'[38] Concluding her review, Thompson suggested that '[b]y claiming that he is writing a 'history of the New Left'', Kenny had demonstrated 'a contempt for the discipline of history itself.'[39] In his understandably robust response to Thompson's strictures, Kenny acknowledged some of the shortfalls of his own approach though added that '[w]hilst good empirical history is highly important, it is not clear that it alone will solve many problems of interpretation particular to the New Left':

> Can the 'meaning' and significance of a current which has always been unconventional in political and intellectual terms be grasped within a strictly orthodox historical analysis? Personally, I doubt it. The different levels at which the

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[33] Ibid., p. 21.
[34] Madeleine Davis, 'The Marxism of the British New Left', in *The Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 11, No. 3, p. 337.
[35] Michael Kenny, 'Interpreting the New Left: Pitfalls and Opportunities' in *New Left Review*, No. 219 (September-October 1996), p. 138.
[36] Davis, 'The Marxism of the British New Left', p. 338.
[37] Dorothy Thompson, 'On the Trail of the New Left', in *New Left Review*, No. 215 (January-February 1996), p. 93.
[38] Ibid., p. 98.
[39] Ibid., p. 95.

New Left was operating – close personal relationships and conflicts as well as high-level theoretical arguments and developments – require an equally varied analytical response.[40]

Rethinking New Leftism

The starting-point in any attempt to apprehend the meaning and significance of the British New Left must be to recognise that the movement first emerged as a response to a very particular set of social, cultural and political conditions, a 'conjuncture' no less, the shorthand of which may be given as '1956'. In some accounts, the significance of '1956' is itself reduced to imply simply the 'crisis' within the worldwide Communist movement, as seen through the lens of Nikita Khrushchev's so-called 'secret speech', detailing the 'excesses' of Stalinism, in January of that year, and the subsequent crushing of the Hungarian uprising by Soviet tanks the following October. However, whilst the impact of what would soon be dubbed the 'double-exposure' on the leftwing political consciousness and sensibility around the world cannot be underestimated – not least, when combined in Britain with the parallel sense of outrage prompted by Anthony Eden's would-be interventionary adventures on the Suez canal – for those who first set about improvising a *new* left response, the significance of '1956' went considerably deeper. Indeed, as I show in Chapter One, from early on new leftists were at pains to point out how they were acting in response to a much more generalised post-war atmosphere, or 'mood', an historical 'moment', or interruption, of which the contemporary fractures within the Communist movement were just one manifestation. As such, for new leftists, bound up in the shorthand of '1956' were numerous other historical fractures, breaks, transitions, developments and processes. As Hall would later reflect: 'Whether we knew it or not, we were struggling with a difficult act of description, trying to find a language in which to map an emergent 'new world' and its cultural transformations, which defied analysis within the conventional terms of the Left while at the same time deeply undermining them.'

As it is Thompson's seminal elucidation of the various social, economic and cultural processes that presaged the formulation, or 'making', of a distinctive (working) class

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[40] Kenny, 'Interpreting the New Left', p. 140.

consciousness in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may offer a useful criterion for apprehending the distinctive new left sensibility itself; thus, as the celebrated 'Preface' to *The Making of The English Working Class* in 1963 attests, this too 'is a study in an active process, which owes as much to agency as conditioning'; it seeks to '[tie] together a bundle of discrete phenomena' – a historian here, a television playwright there – as part of a much wider sociocultural and historical formulation.[41] As Thompson conceived 'class', I see new leftism, less 'as a 'structure', nor even as a 'category', but as something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships'; as such, I believe it is best approached as 'an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of disparate and seemingly unconnected events, both in the raw material of experience and in consciousness'.[42] Above all, it entails 'the notion of historical relationship', and '[l]ike any other relationship, it is a fluency which evades analysis if we attempt to stop it dead at any given moment and anatomise its structure. The finest meshed sociological net cannot give us a pure specimen of… [new leftism] any more than it can give us one of deference or love. The relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context.'[43] To put it another way, and to employ another Thompsonian formula, I believe that *we can know about new leftism*, because from between roughly the mid-1950s through to the end of the 1970s, significant numbers of men and women in Britain *behaved in new-left ways*.[44]

> [C]lasses do not exist as separate entities, look around, find an enemy class, and then start to struggle. On the contrary, people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, but not exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, they come to know this discovery of class-consciousness.[45]

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[41] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), p. 9.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] E. P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?', in *Social History*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (May, 1978), p. 147.
[45] Thompson, 'Eighteenth-Century English Society', p. 149.

As Thompson suggested elsewhere, 'fluid' analytical categories of this sort are likely to '[present] less difficulty to an historian than to a sociologist or philosopher, since to a historian a class is that which *defines itself as such* by its historical agency.'[46] Correspondingly, I believe that many of the characteristic weaknesses and lacunae associated with existing scholarship on the New Left stems from an *ahistorical* tendency amongst scholars to approach the movement through more rigid, or 'static', analytical categories and interpretative frameworks. Whilst these may be useful in helping to provide an initial point of entry through which to apprehend one or other aspect of the New Left's multifaceted political, cultural and intellectual project – e.g., its relationship to Marxism, its contribution to cultural theory, its political proscriptions – they are, in most cases, actively distorting of new leftism's wider historical significance and meaning: not only do they fail to reflect the degree of flux, tension and contradiction, both personal and organisational, contained with all phases of the New Left's development, but, perhaps more seriously, they fail to acknowledge the mercurial nature of the historical process itself. Arguably, this serves to confuse not only our understanding of the movement's identity overall, but also, the constituent elements – 'Marxism', 'culturalism', 'moralism', 'empiricism', 'theoreticism', etc – of which that identity was made up. Ultimately, as with any historically constituted phenomenon, in order to grasp the meaning of new leftism, 'we cannot understand the parts unless we understand their function and roles in relation to each other and in relation to the whole;'[47] indeed, arguably, to seek to advance one or other aspect of the New Left's identity as its defining leitmotif is to deny the possibility of new leftism from the outset.

Correspondingly, Alan Sinfield notes, how the New Left's 'distinct phase… of activity in the late 1950s and early 1960s', should not be thought confined to its representative journals or even its intellectuals but as something occurring 'in a whole constituency, mainly of younger people.'[48] Similarly, Geoff Eley associates the early New Left with what he invokes as 'a kind of broad-gauged cultural dissidence extending across large areas of British intellectual life and the arts, including cinema,

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[46] Thompson, 'Revolution Again!', p. 24.
[47] Thompson, 'Eighteenth-century English Society', p. 133.
[48] Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London, 1997), p. 270.

popular music, literature, poetry, theater, and television.'[49] Michael Rustin recalls how the New Left represented a 'multidimensional expression of… emergent presences in British culture. Its strength was that it sought to unify, in a common project, a great diversity of experiences and issues, without seeking to reduce them to formulae or subject them to organizational discipline.'[50] Thus in a 1960 article in *Marxism Today*, Arnold Kettle identified the term 'New Left' as representing far more than the 'New Left Grouping' itself. In Kettle's 'Marxian' analysis it was the shorthand term for what he identified as a 'general phenomenon of an increasing impulse Leftwards of people whose basic thinking and approaches remains petty-bourgeois.'[51] In Kettle's contemporary analysis 'The 'New Left' grouping around the *New Left Review*' constituted just 'one aspect of that general movement.'[52]

The hallmarks of British New Leftism can be recognised in the following four ways:

1. An insistence on the interconnections between history and historiography, and contemporary political struggles, with particular attention given to theories of individual and collective 'agency', and historical determinism.

2. A recognition of the importance, even the centrality, of 'popular culture', and cultural forms, as a site of social and political struggle and negotiation.

3. A preoccupation with questions of human agency, subjectivity, consciousness, experience, identity, and identity categories, particularly those related to class, race, ethnicity, gender, sex, and sexuality.

4. A focus on British national development, including analyses of nationhood, 'belonging', and national characteristics, or 'peculiarities'.

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[49] Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the Social History of Society* (Michigan, 2005), p. 17.
[50] Michael Rustin, 'The New Left as a social movement', in Archer et al, *Out of Apathy*, p. 125.
[51] Arnold Kettle, How New is the 'New Left'?' in *Marxism Today*, Vol. 4, No. 10 (October, 1960), p. 306.
[52] Arnold Kettle, 'Reply to Discussion: On the New Left', in *Marxism Today*, Vol. 5, no. 6 (June, 1961), p. 191.

New Leftism was about resisting foreclosure, whether political, cultural or ideological. It opposed itself to pre-emptions of thought or experience, to dogmatic intellectual abstraction; it stood for an extension of possibility. It held that it was in our confrontation with others, above all in our confrontation with difference, that the greatest possibilities for life, growth and expansion are presented to us. It recognised that the political system under which we live is perpetuated primarily through its capacity to convince us that it is all there is. It offered a moral diagnosis of the 1950s – a time distinguished by apathy and affluence, Cold War ideological polarisation, political contraction and the emergence of a mass society. One of the aims of the thesis is to show how the supposedly repressed, conformist and contented 1950s was actually a period of profound intellectual flux and contestation. We are used to being told that it was the combined effects of increasing post-war affluence, of 'never having it so good', and 'permissive legislation' from above, that facilitated an era of cultural and youth breakout in the 1960s. I wish to assert a third element: cultural struggle from below. New Leftism helped to provide the cultural and intellectual basis for a period of profound cultural exploration, expansion and experiment. It helped to prise open the cultural and intellectual space in which large numbers of individuals finally found the courage to speak; to declare their subjective feelings, their fears, their hopes, the neuroses. It emphasised the possibility of a common cultural space in which dons and coalminers might share in the same experience. It emphasised a new way of seeing people, and thinking about people. 'There are no masses…' It had a commitment to listen to other people, to recover and redeem their lives. 'History from below' was one manifestation of this commitment, cultural studies another. This process proliferated out, it touched multiple aspects of life.

Like Marx, new leftists saw socialism as the highest expression of individualism, that the only way we can realize our sovereignty ourselves is in relationship to others. The attempt to forge the New Left into a more orthodox political movement was an abandonment of that insight, and yet this is the aspect to which historians have been most drawn to, and seek to recover. In spite of the history of the New Left, they appear to be intent on repeating its mistakes. New leftism was effectively destroyed by the attempt to control it, limit it, anticipate it, to move it into a purely political or

intellectual realm. New leftism can only flourish as an ethos, as a permanent openness.

New leftists recognized that the pre-existing scripts, narratives and stories we inherit or choose to tell about ourselves are like the callipers by which an invalid learns to walk: at first, they are indispensable, aiding the process, strengthening the bones, muscles and sinews. However, there comes a point when they start to hinder more than help, and we must break out of them if we are ever to run free.

In hindsight, it now seems clear that the representative New Left experience is one of perpetual identity crisis: from the initial 'exposures' of 1956, the recognition of the changing nature of class, the disintegration of the early New Left as a movement itself, the failure of the radical hopes of 1968. However in each case, these crises led not to collapse but to innovation. Thus, 1956 yielded the New Left moment, the changing nature of class facilitated a turn to culture, the failure of cultural struggle led to a turn to theory, which itself facilitated the emergence of new revolutionary constituents; out of the ashes of 1968 emerged the women's movement.

To this extent new leftism can perhaps be apprehended as a form of modernism. Marshall Berman defines 'modernism as any attempt by modern men and women to become subjects as well as objects of modernization, to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it… It implies an open and expansive way of understanding culture; very different from the curatorial approach that breaks up human activity into fragments and locks the fragments into separate cases, labeled by time, place, language, genre and academic discipline.'[53] New leftists attempted to negotiate a world without belief, conviction, commitment. They recognized that any such political conviction is constantly overturned by history's forward march. They asked 'how does one remain human in such times?'; 'how does one sustain aspiration?', 'how does one resist cynicism, apathy, hopelessness?' 'What is it to live in a world without belief, after virtue, after God?'; 'What happens to identity when it is thrown back upon itself, when it has to invent its own stories, when it has to decide for itself?' They recognized that in a time of rapid change, the experience of losing

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[53] Marshall Berman, 'The Broad and Open Way: Preface to the Penguin Edition' of *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York 1988), p. 5.

one's sense of self occurs far more frequently, thus one can either attempt to cling to the old ways with even greater determination, or accept the tearing away inside oneself. For those like Williams, Hoggart, Hall and Dennis Potter, raised in traditional, small, claustrophobic communities, this experience was intensified.

However, as much as they recognized and, indeed, sought to embrace the essential and increasing instability, provisionality, and fluidity of modern life in which all inherited meanings, values and hopes, 'all that is solid melts into air', new leftists consistently stopped short of the apparent relativism of postmodernism. Whilst attracted to its iconoclastic irreverence, they recognized that the claims of 'post-modernity' were ultimately as humanly and intellectually diminishing as the positivist case it sought to usurp. It is possible to find out more and more about less and less. The recurring challenge and potential of modern life is to negotiate the tension between the micro and the macro explanation; the subjective and the objective. Failure to accept this challenge destroys the capacity to understand either.

What the struggle of new leftists did in the latter half of the twentieth century was to open up a cultural space which expanded the realm of discussion: what it was permissible to talk about, a new language of the self. It recognised the new possibilities the post-1956 world offered, it looked to exploit the inherent contradictions and paradoxes of advanced capitalist modernity. I believe that most of us still live in that cultural space today, and yet it appears to be contracting.

Methodology and Structure

As Peter Mandler once observed: 'The best cultural history is… very interdisciplinary – it should draw on fictional and non-fictional texts, on visual representation, on high-brow, middle, and popular culture, on fantasy and experience' – though, as a coda to this, Mandler also warns that, 'the more we mix in this way the harder is the task of maintaining conceptual clarity.'[54] Like any historian confronting such a potentially *oceanic* subject, I have been obliged to be part-scuba-diver, and part-windsurfer: at

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[54] Peter Mandler, 'The Problem with Cultural History', *Cultural and Social History*, 1/1 (2004), 94-117.

one instant submerging myself into the deeper crevices and canyons, whilst at the next gliding swiftly over the surface. Where possible, in the latter cases, I have tried to give some sense of the potential depths which I believe still remain to be plumbed. The advent of the 'internet age', and the rapid proliferation of digital archives, online media and resources offers, at least, the potential for a far richer reading of the latter twentieth century than that which, for obvious reasons, has been available to historians of any earlier period.

At several points in my research, I have been struck by the qualitative difference between watching, or listening to, an interview with, for instance, Dennis Potter or Stuart Hall, as opposed to simply reading the transcribed text. Meanings, inferences, sentiments, and emotions are conveyed in a way that is simply not possible to detect in the printed word. Equally, the use of ellipses in a transcribed text, for example, do not make it clear whether or not something has been omitted from the transcript, or whether they have been inserted to signify a pause or break in the dialogue; but, equally, how long a pause?

The BFI's excellent 'ScreenOnline' collection includes, amongst other riches, a series of interviews conducted between 1967 and 1968 for the proposed television series *Now and Then*. For example, it was whilst exploring one of Braden's 'vox pops' on some of the 'hot topics' of the day that I came across a 1968 interview with a young Ian Purdie, who, within three years would gain notoriety as a defendant in the first of the so-called 'Angry Brigade' trials. Towards the end of the interview Braden asks Purdie to clarify his political position – 'If there's a simple way of putting it, I think we may as well have it on record.' Purdie's answer provides a valuable insight into how, by 1968, what were by then recognisably 'new leftist' positions were undergoing revision and flux, a flux that would, at least in Purdie's case lead to an alleged flirtation with terrorist militancy:

> PURDIE: There isn't a simple way of putting it, but I am… shall we say, 'on
> the Left'? Which is apart from Labour Party politics – rather further left than that –
> but people who are not in politics would brand me as a 'communist'; people who are
> in politics would understand that there are very many different types of communist –
> of which I belong to none – but I believe, let's put it this way, in socialism.

>BRADEN: What you consider to be *real* socialism as opposed to what passes for socialism?
>
>PURDIE: Yeah, yeah. That seems fine.

The questions and implications thrown up by these new media sources might form the basis of a doctoral thesis in its own right. Methodological distortions, perhaps most particularly in the case of privately maintained weblogs or open discussion forums (often seem little more than platforms for the expression of hyperbole, prejudice and individual grievance).[55] Nevertheless, for contemporary historians to overlook or dismiss them, merely by virtue of their having been 'found online' would surely constitute a profound failure of the historical imagination, not to mention a greatly missed opportunity. The imaginative and considered work that been produced around the growing availability of 'searchable' digital newspaper archives by, amongst others, Adrian Bingham, reveals the potential riches contained within these new media sources.[56] Nevertheless, a lingering allegiance to textual analysis, admittedly often for valid and cogent reasons, still persists.

An understanding of the especial character and appeal of 'underground' newspapers like *International Times* (*IT*) or *OZ* would be greatly diminished if one were only to read their articles in unadorned black and white text. Indeed, notoriously, in the latter case, text would often be made to appear subservient to the image, with disgruntled readers regularly writing to complain that the psychedelic colours in such and such an issue had rendered entire pages of journalism virtually illegible. As historians, we should be prepared to immerse ourselves as much as possible in the cultural atmosphere of the periods we choose to study.

I have resisted the urge to seek out interviews with surviving participants – as Dorothy Thompson once cautioned would-be historians of the New Left, 'the least reliable source of all is the personal memory of individuals.'[57] No doubt, interesting and unanticipated perspectives could have been garnered from hearing the personal

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[55] See Tim Hitchcock, 'Confronting the Digital, Or How Academic History Writing Lost the Plot', *Cultural & Social History*, Volume 10, No. 1 (March 2013), pp. 9 – 20.
[56] See Adrian Bingham, 'The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians', *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (2010), 225-231.
[57] Thompson, 'On the Trail of the New Left', p. 94.

testimonies of those still living – yet it would have seemed methodologically questionable. Who could speak for the large majority who are not? As it is, most of the key figures within the New Left have already published personal accounts, in article and book form, of their experience of these years – and whilst, of course, these should not be approached uncritically, we can at least assume that it is the testimony on which they would place most weight.

I have been less preoccupied with unearthing *new* or 'hidden' source material, than I have been with looking at the *same* things that other historians have looked at and trying to see them *anew*. This is partly based on a straightforward issue of practicality: the amount of material already in the public domain, and to which any historian of the New Left is obliged to attend, is vast – at least, far more than a three-to-four year PhD programme permits. As a result I have been obliged to forge what has appeared to me as the most direct narrative path, if, at the same time, as being painfully aware of the numerous *alternative* paths (and potential riches) that might have been found in the surrounding thicket. My contention, is that in the decades since its eclipse, British new leftism has been generally poorly served by its historiography, and that the value of historical work consists as much in its capacity to reveal new *ways* of seeing, as it does in discovering new *things* to see. I have tried to show that new leftism, far from being the abject 'failure' it is so often depicted as did actually make remarkable inroads into post-war British society and culture, and even politics. I have attempted to show that new leftism was not a series of objectives, or policies, let alone an ideology, but a way of addressing the problems and opportunities of modernity/contemporary world.

Over five chapters the thesis seeks to trace the major evolutionary developments and mutations, as well as wider cultural permeations, of British new leftism, from its inception in the mid-1950s to its unsettled and ambiguous denouement at the end of the 1970s. Chapter One, **'Left Over? The Lost World of British New Leftism'**, attempts to evoke the peculiar social, cultural and political context out of which the necessity for some kind of *new* left intervention first came to be openly acknowledged. Amongst other things, the chapter seeks to highlight the early movement's distinctive emphasis on heightening (rather than suppressing) the various tensions and contradictions within the 'socialist-humanist' project, with a view to

unfreezing the 'dialectic of history', during a period of pronounced ideological polarization and intellectual foreclosure. In conclusion, it suggests that the attempt to forge the New Left into a more orthodox political movement at the end of the 1950s placed considerable strain on its founding pluralist agenda. Chapter Two, **'Sound and Fury: New Leftism and the British 'Cultural Revolt' of the 1950s'**, examines the early New Left's various attempts to decipher, contextualise and harness the growing 'mood' of dissent within British culture and society as it began to gather pace during the latter half of the 1950s. Highlighting the efforts of leading new leftists like Hall, Thompson and Williams to relate the contemporary 'cultural revolt' to the New Left's own wider political and cultural proscriptions, the chapter attempts to demonstrate how, by 1958, a vibrant new-left sub-culture of its own, incorporating various angry young novelists and playwrights, 'Free Cinema' filmmakers, television documentaries and plays, pioneering radio shows, scholarly books and journals, Left Clubs, coffee-houses, summer schools and numerous other burgeoning cultural initiatives had come into being. Following on from this, Chapter Three, '**Laureate of New Leftism? Dennis Potter's Sense of Vocation'**, examines the profound and enduring impact that the early new-left cultural sensibility, had on the life and work of the television playwright, Dennis Potter. Whilst other contemporary figures – Lindsay Anderson, Trevor Griffiths, Charles Parker, Arnold Wesker – can be shown to have enjoyed more direct personal and organisational links with the New Left itself – and, indeed, to have pursued a more overtly 'leftwing' agenda in their representative work – the chapter argues that few individuals can be shown to have embraced the burgeoning new-left 'mood' and sensibility of the late 1950s with more enthusiasm, or pursued its implications with such singularity of purpose and intensity, than Potter. Following a demoralising period in the early 1960s, during which he had finally come to abandon the idea of pursuing an orthodox political career, Potter joined forces with what would later be recognised as a 'golden generation' of young British television writers, including Tony Garnett, Ken Loach, David Mercer, and Alan Plater, motivated by a commitment to 'join the anger of Jimmy Porter… with the political engagement of the New Left.'[58] Potter's earliest plays, *The Confidence Course* (1965), *Stand Up Nigel Barton* (1965), and *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* (1966) *Where the Buffalo Roam* (1966), offered penetrating diagnoses of contemporary sociopolitical malaise and

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[58] Caughie, *Television Drama*, p. 65.

decline, all framed through a markedly new-leftist rubric, with advertising, the Tory Party, Labour Party revisionism, and the changing nature of class emerging as the characteristic 'enemies of promise's. Chapter Four, **'Imagined Revolutionaries: The Politics and Postures of '1968''**, explores the crucial intellectual and idiomatic divisions which came to the fore between two distinct generations of new-left intellectuals in the years leading up to '1968'. Whilst it is acknowledged that a younger generation's attack on the 'moralism' and 'pseudo-empiricism' of the early New Left helped to furnish the context for a profound flowering of new Marxian thinking and perspectives in British intellectual life and culture, it is also suggested that much of this agenda proceeded in spite of history. Chapter Five: **'Psychopolitics and Theory Wars: The Denouement of British New Leftism'** details how the rapid failure of the high revolutionary optimism associated with '1968', compelled an increasingly neurotic search for new, and more rigorous theoretical perspectives.

Chapter One

Left Over? The Lost World of British New Leftism[1]

Amongst Western socialists we are witnessing the first stages of a revolt which has certain common features to that in the Communist world, although it is taking place in a quite different context. A number of factors have conspired to induce a sense of impotence in the individual in the face of historical events; men feel themselves to be victims of vast technological changes or of international accidents which they cannot influence, powerless before great bureaucratised institutions, in the state machinery and in the labour movement, and before commercial mass media which manipulate peoples' minds and debase their responses.

> E. P. Thompson, 'Agency and Choice – I: A Reply to Criticism', in *The New Reasoner*, No. 5 (Summer 1958), p. 90.

When I arrived in London in 1956, I was only dimly aware of the social ferment. CND marches, assorted demos and plays like *Look Back in Anger* were opening shots in a battle that would rage for the next fifteen years. People read the *New Statesman* and talked about 'the new Left' as if determined to reorder the past three decades of British history.

> Charles Marowitz, *Burnt Bridges: A Souvenir of the Swinging Sixties and Beyond* (London 1990), p. 1.

Today Molly rang me. Tommy is involved with the new group of young socialists. Molly said she had sat in the corner listening while they talked. She felt as if 'she had gone back a hundred years to her own youth' when she was first in the C. P. 'Anna, it was extraordinary! It was really so *odd*. Here they are, with no time for the C. P…. and no time for the Labour Party… There are a few hundred of them, scattered up and down Britain, yet they all talk as if Britain will be socialist in about ten years at the latest and through their effort of course. You know, as if they will be running the new beautiful socialist Britain that will be born on Tuesday week…'

> Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London 1962), p. 437.

In early 2000, the returning editor of the newly relaunched *New Left Review* (*NLR*), Perry Anderson, published an extended editorial article assessing the trajectory the journal had taken since its first appearance forty years earlier.[2] Offered also partly as a

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[1] The subtitle of this chapter is intended to evoke Raphael Samuel's, *The Lost World of British Communism* (London & New York 2006), first serialised, in three parts, in *New Left Review* (No. 154 November-December 1984), pp. 3 - 53; No. 156 (March-April 1986), pp. 63 – 113; and No. 165 (September-October 1987), pp. 52 – 91.

[2] Though *NLR* has run continuously since its launch in January 1960, *NLR* No. 238 (November-December 1999) marked the end of the original series. Anderson's original tenure (with periodic interruptions) as editor-in-chief had run from 1962 to 1983, after which he had given way to his long-term colleague, Robin Blackburn. Blackburn remained in the post until Anderson's return in 2000.

survey of Western politico-cultural developments over the previous four decades (and partly as a personal apologia) 'Renewals' conceded amongst other things that against the best hopes of its founders the lifespan of *NLR* had run parallel to what Anderson mournfully identified as 'the fragmentation of the culture of the Left'.[3] Presenting thumbnail sketches of the political ('a third of the planet had broken with capitalism'), intellectual ('a discovery process of suppressed leftist and Marxist traditions'), and cultural ('exit from the conformist atmosphere of the fifties') conditions out of which the journal had originally come to fruition, Anderson further lamented that 'four decades later, the environment in which *NLR* took shape has all but completely passed away.'[4]

The elegiac tone was not without a degree of irony; it was, after all, Anderson himself who had once been held up as the *enfant terrible* who had done most to undermine the avowedly more inclusive and pluralistic 'agenda' of what was later distinguished as the 'first' or 'early' New Left.[5] Indeed, to some observers, his commandeering of the *NLR*'s editorial reigns in 1962-3, and subsequent dissolution of its founding editorial committee, had amounted to nothing less than a 'palace coup', following which the last vestiges of a 'peculiarly' British (or *English*) 'tradition' of popular radical struggle had been systematically excised from the picture.[6] Nevertheless, in his attempt to both restate and *renew* the identity of the *NLR* at the turn of a new century, Anderson was clearly less preoccupied with redressing any historic personal or institutional grievances so much as he was with highlighting what he saw as the almost total evaporation of the intellectual, social and cultural atmosphere that had compelled individuals to make dissenting political commitments in the first place:

> For the first time since the Reformation, there are no longer any significant
> oppositions – that is, systematic rival outlooks – within the thought-world of the

Since 2003, the journal's chief editor has been Susan Watkins. Unless otherwise stated, citations in the following refer to the original series run.

[3] Perry Anderson, 'Renewals', in *New Left Review*, Series II, No. 1 (January – February 2000), p. 18.

[4] Ibid., pp. 7 – 9.

[5] See Peter Sedgwick, 'The Two New Lefts', in *International Socialism*, Vol. 1, No. 17 (August 1964), pp. 15 – 42, reprinted in David Widgery, *The Left in Britain 1956 – 1968* (London 1976), pp. 131 – 153.

[6] For E. P. Thompson's notoriously bitter account of the 1962/3 transition see 'The Peculiarities of the English' in *Socialist Register*, No. 2, (1965) pp. 311 - 362, later reprinted, in unexpurgated form, in Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, pp. 92 – 192. For Anderson's characteristically more detached summary, see Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London, 1980), pp.135 – 137.

West; and scarcely any on a world scale either… What this means for a journal like *NLR* is a radical discontinuity in the culture of the Left… Virtually the entire horizon of reference in which the generation of the sixties grew up has been wiped away.[7]

By emphasising the distinct politico-cultural climate of the new century in this way, Anderson was almost certainly looking to draw a line demarcating the re-launched *NLR* from the twentieth-century 'movement' from which its name derived. After all, even in 2000, the term 'new left' may still have seemed to many to be one primarily bound up with the radical politics and postures of the 1960s; thus, if genuine *renewal* was now to take place, as Anderson clearly hoped it would, he rightly recognised that the journal must first equip itself against any implicit sense of anachronism – let alone of its editors' wishing to resurrect a 'radical' sixties' agenda which (arguably, even before the decade was over) had already long descended into terminal malaise. Correspondingly, in Anderson's resolute assessment, the stance of any meaningful leftist journal, or *movement*, in the twenty-first century must be one of 'uncompromising realism':

> The test of NLR's capacity to strike a distinctive political note should be how often it can calmly shock readers by calling a spade a spade, rather than falling in with the well-meaning cant or self-deception on the Left. […] The only starting-point for a realistic Left today is a lucid registration of historical defeat.[8]

Published, as it was, during a period of relative resurgence for the British Labour Party, the characteristically austere (or 'Olympian') analysis offered by Anderson's 'Renewals', might have been taken by some readers as incommensurately bleak and pessimistic;[9] yet, even at this moment of invigorating moral candour and personal disclosure, it was perhaps still possible to detect a sense of enduring lacuna, if not

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[7] Anderson, 'Renewals', p. 17.

[8] Ibid., pp. 15 – 16. It is worth pointing out that Anderson's editorial shares considerable thematic similarities with his own much earlier analysis, 'The Left in the Fifties', first published in *NLR*, ?, in ? 1965; indeed, there are parts which might have been used interchangeably: 'For a decade in Britain, under Conservative rule, there was a recognizable and active Left. Now at last there is a Labour Government. But there is no longer, in the same sense, a Left. This paradox must be the starting-point of any consideration of the tasks confronting socialists today. Clearly, the most urgent need is to recreate an independent, combative Left, with its own goals and its own time-table.'

[9] See, for example, Gilbert Achcar, 'The 'Historical Pessimism' of Perry Anderson', in *International Socialism*, No, 88 (Autumn 2000), pp. 135 – 41; Duncan Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect? A History of New Left Review* (Monmouth, 2007), pp. *viii – xi*, and Stefan Collini, 'A Life in Politics: New Left Review at 50' in *The Guardian*, 'Review Section' (Saturday, February 13th 2010), p. 10.

outright *bad faith*, in Anderson's interpretative overview. If nothing else, with his semi-nostalgic evocation of the comparatively radicalised cultural atmosphere in which both the *NLR* and 'the generation of the sixties' had cut their political teeth, he had offered only scant impression of the journal's distinctive *pre*-1960s origins – nor, less still, of how the political, intellectuals and cultural preoccupations of its founding intellectual milieu might have contrasted or conflicted with that of their more celebrated (and castigated) sixties' counterparts.[10] Had Anderson cast his eye just a little further back, he might have been reminded that the very 'leftist' epoch whose effacement he now lamented was itself born out of a recognition of profound historical defeat and disjuncture – indeed, one which had also advanced the principle of 'renewal' as being inseparable from the British left's long-term political survival.

What follows is an attempt to evoke a lost world; nearly six decades after its emergence in the latter-half of the 1950s, the social, cultural and political conditions out of which a distinct *new*-leftist *ethos* and sensibility first came to be articulated in Britain must be thought even more remote than Anderson found them to be at the beginning of the present century.

In advancing reasons for the 'movement's' apparently sudden 'collapse' or 'disintegration' at the beginning of the 1960s, scholars have been quick to point to what they see as its persistent organisational and strategic uncertainty, its 'ambiguous' political identity, and 'romantic', if not outright 'utopian', credulity in the face of virtually unremitting political crisis and defeat:[11] Duncan Hallas, for example, recalls

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[10] Indeed, arguably, 'Renewals' only reaffirmed what was, by the end of the twentieth century, an already well-established notion amongst British left-wing intellectuals – namely, that the 1960s had constituted a vital opportunity for the post-war radical left, which, through a tragic combination of mismanagement, misfortune, and mendacity had somehow gone begging. This 'loss' or 'defeat', so the narrative goes, not only left a disastrous political vacuum (the pre-conditions for the rise of the so-called 'new right' in the latter half of the 1970s), but also served to undermine leftist political ideals in general. As a result, the Left, since the 1960s, is widely considered to have gained little other than a debilitating awareness of its own increasing political impotence. As Eric Hobsbawm describes: 'Things fell apart for moderate reformist social democrats as well as for communists and other revolutionaries… After the 1980s the defeat of the traditional left, both political and intellectual, was undeniable. Its literature was dominated by variations on the theme 'What's Left?'' (Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 275.)

[11] It is, however, necessary to acknowledge here that Paul Blackledge has questioned the existence of any such orthodoxy: In an article taking issue with John Saville's invocation of 'some unnamed academic consensus which seemingly finds the New Left wanting for its failure to build a socialist organization after 1956', Blackledge unequivocally asserts that 'this consensus does not exist: the general opinion within the academy seems to fall somewhere between ambivalence and hostility to the counterfactual project of building a New Left organization.' Blackledge's case is somewhat

a 'politically amorphous' grouping with an 'organisationally unserious character' in which '[a]mbiguity and vagueness reigned…';[12] Madeline Davis tells us that early New Left discussions 'lacked analytical sharpness', their 'primary orientation… express[ing] a moral and political rejection of Stalinism that was not fully worked through in theoretical terms;'[13] Michael Kenny asserts that early New Left 'politics and ideas were too contradictory';[14] whilst Paul Blackledge identifies how 'weaknesses with the New Left's strategic theory … informed its disastrous practice'.[15]

It is worth noting that such analyses suggest a considerable debt to an *original* critical appraisal of the early New Left, commenced under the auspices of a so-called 'second' generation of 'new-left' intellectuals as they came to the fore in the wake of the editorial changes at the *NLR* in the early-to-mid 1960s. Chiefly associated with figures such as Perry Anderson, Robin Blackburn, and Tom Nairn, this critique did much to divert subsequent critical attention away from the early New Left's original pluralist agenda(s), towards what was identified as its latent 'movementist' ambitions, and related organisational, strategic and theoretical deficiencies.[16] Thus, as Anderson summarised it in 1965: The New Left began as 'a handful of intellectuals', with some appeal to a 'certain – minority – middle-class audience…' 'Once it had ceased to be a

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undermined, however, by the rather questionable citations (to the respective studies by Chun, Kenny and Dworkin) he offers in support of his argument. For instance, in Chun's case, on the very page Blackledge cites, it is stated that a 'major failing of the New Left was its lack of any organisational strength.' (Chun, *The British New Left*, p. *xvi*.) It might also be thought strange that Blackledge chooses to question the existence of a historiographical consensus regarding the early New Left's alleged 'failure', in an article titled, 'Learning from Defeat'. (See Paul Blackledge, 'Learning from Defeat: Reform, Revolution and the Problem of Organization in the First New Left' in *Contemporary Politics*, Volume 10, No. 1 (March 2004), p. 22.)

[12] Duncan Hallas, 'How Can We Move On?', in *Socialist Register* Vol. 14 (London, 1977), p. 7.

[13] Madeleine Davis, 'Arguing Affluence': New Left Contributions to the Socialist Debate 1957 – 63', in *Twentieth Century British History*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2012) p. 520; and Madeleine Davis 'The Origins of the British New Left' in Martin Klimke and Joachim Scharloth (eds.), *1968 in Europe: A History of Protest and Activism, 1956 – 1977* (New York 2008), p. 48.

[14] Kenny, *The First New Left*, p. 201.

[15] Blackledge, 'Learning from Defeat', p. 23.

[16] For the fullest account of Anderson's generally withering assessment of his New Left forebears' intellectual and strategic approach, with particular attention given to the character of E. P. Thompson, see his aforementioned *Arguments Within English Marxism*. Further reflections can be found, with varying critical emphases, in his 'The Left in the Fifties', in *New Left Review*, No. 29 (January-February 1965), pp. 3 – 18; 'Problems of Socialist Strategy' in Perry Anderson & Robin Blackburn (eds.) *Towards Socialism* (New York 1965), pp. 221 – 290; 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism' in *New Left Review*, No. 35 (January-February 1966), pp. 2 – 42.; 'The Figures of Descent', in *New Left Review*, No. 161 (January-February 1987), pp. 20 – 77; 'A Culture in Contraflow I', in *New Left Review*, No. 180 (March-April 1990), pp. 41 – 78; 'Foreword' to *English Questions* (London 1992) pp. 1 – 11; & 'Diary', in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 15, No. 20 (21 October 1993).

purely intellectual grouping', however, 'the hope of becoming a major political movement haunted it'.[17] The 'basis' of the early New Left's 'politics' meanwhile, had been 'a *moral* critique of society, dissociated from the complex historical process in which values can alone ultimately find incarnation.'[18] Correspondingly, in Anderson's view, the movement's 'leaders' had been guilty of 'a major failure of nerve and intelligence, an inability to name things as they were'; 'without any articulated ideology' and 'lacking clear-cut social boundaries, the [early] New Left was unable to focus any precise image of itself or – by extension – of its society' – 'objective ambiguity became subjective confusion and, ultimately, evasion'; its 'failure' came about as a 'direct consequence of… [its] ambiguous identity'.[19] By the time of the editorial changes at the *NLR*, Anderson concluded, the movement had 'lost the virtues of intellectual energy without gaining those of political efficacy. Theoretical and intellectual work were sacrificed for a mobilizing role which perpetually escaped it.'[20]

Even at the time it may have been apparent that at least some of this critical zeal was based on more than just *intellectual* divergences over matters of organisational or strategic priority between two more or less distinct generations of British new-left 'leadership'; as the new editor-in-chief (and principal investor) of a young and, at that stage, deeply financially-compromised monthly journal, it was partly beholden on Anderson to make as clear a distinction as possible between what he sought to advance as the journal's *new* direction and approach, and what one of his subsequent editorials invoked as the hitherto 'prevailing pattern of *NLR*'.[21] As it was, by assuming control of British new leftism's principal mouthpiece in the early 1960s, Anderson and his cohort were well-placed to both diagnose their forebears' terminal condition *and* perform the subsequent autopsy; arguably, however, the reductive rendering of the New Left that emerged from the Andersonian *NLR*'s operating table in the mid-1960s was a markedly different entity to that which had tentatively spluttered into existence a little less than a decade earlier.[22]

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[17] Anderson, 'Left in the Fifties', p. 16.
[18] Anderson, 'Problems of Socialist Strategy', p. 221.
[19] Anderson, 'Left in the Fifties', p. 17.
[20] Ibid..
[21] Unsigned editorial, 'To Our Readers', in *New Left Review*, No. 24 (March-April 1964), pp. 3 – 4.
[22] Revising some of her own earlier critical assessments, Madeleine Davis has recently acknowledged how '[t]he force and fame of Anderson's critique of' the early New Left, in particular Thompson's 'Socialist Humanism' 'has overshadowed the more nuanced discussions that took place shortly after

'A Mood rather than a Movement'

As it is, the diverse political, intellectual and moral agendas that lay behind the emergence of a *new* left in Britain in the latter half of the 1950s were both more modest and more extraordinarily *ambitious* than most critical assessments have since seemed willing to allow; *contra* claims that appear to proceed from an assumption that the early New Left's primary objective was always to forge itself into a uniform political identity or 'movement', it must be emphasised that such an idea was only latterly invoked as a serious, or perhaps even *desirable*, possibility.[23] Indeed, it was at least partly in the hope of moving beyond such monolithic political denominations and groupings that the idea of a *new* left 'intervention' first began to take root. As one of its leading exponents, E. P. Thompson, later characterised it, the New Left was conceived as 'a movement of dissent, which challenges not this or that policy of the parties but *the kind of politics* in which all parties are implicated';[24] likewise, for Stuart Hall, the primary appeal – and future prospects – of any *new* left designation would depend on its adherents' capacity to move beyond both the forms and conventions of mainstream political discourse: '[W]e didn't want any structure, we didn't want any leadership, we didn't want any permanent party apparatuses. You belonged to the New Left by affiliating with it. We didn't want anybody to pay any dues.'[25]

Correspondingly, a considerable part of the New Left's initial phase was given over to emphasising how it was intended as precisely *not* an alternative *political* 'movement', 'faction', or 'party', but rather as an 'expression', or 'articulation', of a much wider

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this essay appeared.' (Madeleine Davis, 'Reappraising British Socialist Humanism', in *The Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Winter, 2013), p. 62.)

[23] As John Saville would later observe: 'It is often suggested that those who brought together the *New Reasoner* and the *Universities and Left Review* failed to develop a lasting political organisation, but that this was ever a serious objective is not tenable.' (Saville, *Memoirs from the Left*, p. 117.) Whether this amounts to, as Paul Blackledge has since claimed, an attempt on Saville's part to 'willfully obscure the theoretical issues involved in the New Left's debate on organization' is open to question, though Saville's observation does, at least, suggest that the idea of the New Left as 'movement' was always considered as secondary, to its principle perception of itself as reflecting a wider mood, attitude or tendency – an *ethos* rather than an *ethic*.

[24] E. P. Thompson, 'The Segregation of Dissent', in *New University*, No. 6 (May 1961), p. 13; reprinted in E. P. Thompson, *Writing By Candlelight* (London 1980), p. 2.

[25] Quoted in Kuan-Hsing Chen, 'The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual: An Interview with Stuart Hall by Kuan-Hsing Chen', in David Morley & Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London, 1996), p. 497.

contemporary 'mood' or sensibility – a phenomenon that could be traced 'both within the traditional labour movement and outside it'.[26] The lineaments of this 'mood' were themselves seen to be highly diverse and complex, incorporating both short and long-term domestic socioeconomic and cultural developments, as well as more abstract psychic and existential factors associated with the ideological polarisations of the 'Cold War', and, from the early 1950s onwards, the looming presence of 'the Bomb'. As early as 1940, writers such as George Orwell were commenting on what they detected as a newly emergent 'mental atmosphere' – an awareness that 'we live in a *shrinking* world', that 'the 'democratic vistas' [of the past] have ended in barbed wire…'[27] Elsewhere, announcing the final edition of the cultural journal, *Horizon*, in December 1949, Cyril Connolly speculated how 'the inner trend of the Forties' – 'between man, betrayed by science, bereft of religion, deserted by the pleasant imaginings of humanism against the blind fate of which he is now so expertly conscious' – only seemed set to continue: 'This is the message of the Forties from which, alas, there seems no escape, for it is closing time in the gardens of the West and from now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude or the quality of his despair.'[28]

Raymond Williams would later recall his own feeling in 'the immediate postwar years… that except for certain simple kinds of idealising retrospect there was no main current of thought in the world which had not been incorporated within the fundamental forms of the capitalist and imperialist system'; indeed, '[o]rthodox communism and orthodox social democracy – its traditional opponents' had themselves adopted 'many features of this system in their most powerful forms', in most cases 'all the more dangerously because they had been fused with continuing

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[26] Thompson, 'The New Left', p. 11. As Thompson unequivocally stated in 1959: 'The New Left in Britain does not offer an alternative faction, party, or leadership to those now holding the field; and during the present period of transition, it must continue to resist any temptation to do so.' (Thompson, 'The New Left', p. 15.) See also Alasdair MacIntyre: 'What characterises the New Left is not the holding of an agreed set of doctrines, but something more difficult to characterise, a frame of mind.' (Alasdair MacIntyre, 'The New Left', in *Labour Review*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (October-November 1959), p. 99.) The secretary of the London New Left Club, George Clark, would later describe how, 'the mood occurred in many places at the same moment: the New Left was at one and the same time its political voice and its servant.' (George Clark, 'The Condition of England Question', in *People & Politics: Special Issue* (Easter, 1967) p. 212.)
[27] George Orwell, 'Inside the Whale' (1940), reprinted in George Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London, 1970), p. 18.
[28] Cyril Connolly, 'Comment', in *Horizon*, Vol. 20, No. 120 – 121 (December 1949 – January 1950), p. 362.

aspirations to social liberation and development'; yet just 'to feel this', Williams acknowledged, 'was to be pressed back towards the extreme subjectivism and fatalism which then, and for a generation, dominated our thought.'[29]

In Britain, one of the principal manifestations of these trends was a deleterious political apathy and cynicism, 'an inertia of the will and a moral myopia: an incapacity to look beyond the customary forms and makeshift remedies, to comprehend the pace of change in this century… or, indeed, to imagine the precariousness of civilisation in the face of nuclear peril.'[30] People, it was suggested, had become 'enmeshed in a tissue of commonplace actions and responses'; estranged from their own radical heritage and vocabularies, and facing an increasingly uncertain future, they fell back 'into habits of thinking', which accepted 'commonplace appearances and received opinions not only as being true but also as being inevitable and likely to endure.'[31] Parliamentary politics itself was increasingly coming to be viewed as 'a means not to possibility but to a destruction of all possibility' –the prevailing attitude being summarised in the statement: ''there's not much to choose between 'em, they're all in it for themselves, what's the use?''[32] In Westminster, '[sat] Tweedledum and Tweedledee… the field of political vision narrowed to the dismal task of capturing control of [the] system', though with the express intention of ensuring only its continued 'stability'.[33] Correspondingly, not until there was 'a decisive shift in political consciousness' would any *new* left be in a position to commence 'work with a revolutionary perspective in view.'[34] '[S]ocialism', it was insisted, '[could never] develop as a set of ideas or as a programme without a matrix of values, a set of assumptions, a base in experience which gives them validity. There have to be some points of 'recognition' – where the abstract planning meets sharply with human needs as people experience them *in the here and now*.'[35]

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[29] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford, 1973), p. 305.
[30] Thompson, 'Agency and Choice', p. 89.
[31] Ibid., p. 89.
[32] Alasdair MacIntyre, 'Breaking the Chains of Reason', in E. P. Thompson (ed.), *Out of Apathy* (London 1960), p. 197; Thompson, 'The New Left', p. 6.
[33] Stuart Hall, 'Introducing NLR', in *New Left Review*, No. 1 (January-February, 1960), p. 2.
[34] Hall, 'Introducing NLR', p. 2.
[35] Stuart Hall, 'A Sense of Classlessness', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 5 (Autumn, 1958), p. 32.

A Permanent Aspiration

At the same time, however, it was also recognised that if new leftists were to present a convincing case for socialism 'in the here and now' it would also be at least partly necessary to recover a sense of what socialism had represented in the past. Indeed, it was widely recognised that one of the greatest obstacles working *against* the revivification of socialist thinking and perspectives in Britain were those who, under a similar banner of 'left revisionism', were concurrently serving to project an idea of contemporary socialism as little more than a leftist variation on the so-called post-war 'Keynesian settlement'. As it was, '[f]or most Labour theorists in this period discussion of socialism was equated with the claim that the Welfare State was British Socialism, realised'.[36] At the same time, a newly 'modified Tory 'image', with its accent on human industrial relations, sound public administration, and the 'Opportunity State',' appeared to have 'robbed the traditional Labour appeal of its traditional foil.'[37] Meanwhile, 'the stridency and crude class reductionism which passed for Marxist criticism in some circles, the mixture of quantitative rhetoric and guilty casuism which accompanied apologetics for Zhdanovism – all these seemed to have corroded even the vocabulary of socialism.'[38]

The socialist tradition in Britain had been inaugurated on the optimistic 'claim that men *can* find a solution' to their social and economic ills; 'that they can build an industrial society without alienation, that they can recreate meaningful social bonds without tyranny and a reversion to the closed society'.[39] Beyond this, however, it also expressed a 'faith that socialism was not only economically practicable but was also intensely desirable; that is, that socialist society would revolutionise human relationships, replacing respect for property by respect for man, and replacing the acquisitive society by the common weal.'[40] In identifying the contradictions and negations of industrial society, Marx and Engels had 'hoped to assist in the liberation of men from false, partial class consciousness, thereby liberating them from

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[36] Unsigned, 'Editorial', *Universities and Left Review*, No. 1 (Spring, 1957), p. 1.

[37] E. P. Thompson, 'Revolution Again! Or Shut Yours Ears and Run', in *New Left Review*, No. 6 (November-December, 1960), p. 27.

[38] E. P. Thompson, 'The Long Revolution I', in *New Left Review*, No. 9 (May-June 1961), p. 27.

[39] Charles Taylor, 'Alienation and Community', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 5 (Autumn, 1958), p. 11 [emphasis added].

[40] E. P. Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism', in *New Reasoner*, No. 1 (Summer, 1957), p. 106.

victimhood to blind economic causation, and extending immeasurably the region of their choice and conscious agency.'[41]   Whilst Thompson acknowledged that 'pragmatism' of this sort might 'take the British Labour Movement through another few years' it would 'not prove adequate to dealing with the increasingly complex problems' and challenges of the emerging society. [42] He noted: 'What must be seen to have 'failed' is the aspiration itself: the revolutionary potential - not within Russian society alone – but within any society, within man himself.'[43]

Like Morris before them, new leftists looked to reassert a vision of socialism, 'not [as] a change for the sake of change, but a change involving the very noblest ideal of human life and duty: a life in which every human being should find unrestricted scope for his best powers and faculties.'[44] To this extent, socialism could only ever be a recurring *individual* 'choice', a *personal* commitment to a 'process', a *permanent* aspiration. Indeed, to most new leftists it was the squandering or *subversion* of this aspirational dimension that most clearly accounted for the generally abject condition of 'actually existing socialism', both in the countries of the Soviet bloc, and in the pallid 'evolutionary' theory of Western social democrats.

The ensuing society far from being the *negation*, or denial, of the individual, and mankind's subjective *personal* quest for meaningful self-understanding and self-fulfilment – provided the conditions for its highest possible realisation, an 'expression of man's need for his fellow men, [and] his undivided social being'. As Marx himself had put it in *The German Ideology* (1845), 'only in community with others has each individual the means of cultivating his gifts [for sympathy and compassion, reason and love] in all directions; only in community, therefore, is personal freedom possible.'[45] *Authentic* self-realisation and individuality, can only be achieved as an outcome of a constantly developing *social* consciousness; paradoxically, however, the foundation of social consciousness is the painful recognition and understanding of

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[41] Ibid., p. 115.
[42] Ibid., p. 107.
[43] Thompson, 'Outside the Whale', in Thompson (ed.) *Out of Apathy*, p. 156.
[44] Quoted in E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1955; 1976), p. 725.
[45] Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* [1845] (London, 1970), p. 83.

oneself as an isolated being, both sovereign and subject to one's encounters and relations with other isolated beings.[46]

As Marx and Engels observed in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848): 'In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality.'[47] Correspondingly, for the founding fathers, the first and last premise of Communist society was the 'free development' of individual life.[48] As Gareth Stedman Jones has since discovered, 'what is most noticeable in the discussions of 1845-6 [amongst members of the London-based Communist League] is the concern… that communism should above all enable the free self-development of individuals', and an insistence that, 'Communism and individual self-realization must go together.'[49]

It was now incumbent on a new generation of socialists to 'confirm the confidence of the founders of the socialist movement.'[50] As MacIntyre saw it, '[t]o most… British intellectuals' the very concept of commitment to such a cause [as the 'liberation of mankind' had] become suspect'; whilst the 'notion' of '[seeking] to be in any sense a prophet of hope' was considered both 'pretentious and vulgar.'[51] Elsewhere Peter Townsend observed how 'any simple expression of faith in the goodness of man frightens and embarrasses the intellectual. He does not want to be taken for a sucker in public and you rarely find him saying anything so straightforward and naïve. He is much too cynical and self-conscious.'[52] Thus, at the same time as they sought to recover the radical and humanist implications imperatives of socialism itself, new leftists also attempted to assert a more general principle that '*ideas matter*'; that 'it is man's business, if he is not to be the mere victim of involuntary reflexes or of a predetermined historical flux, to strive to understand himself and his times and to make reasonable and right choices.'[53]

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[46] Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism', p. 128.

[47] Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* [1848] (London, 2002), p. 237.

[48] Ibid., *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 244.

[49] Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Introduction', in Marx et al, *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 46.

[50] Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism', p. 107.

[51] MacIntyre, 'Breaking the Chains of Reason', p. 195.

[52] Peter Townsend, 'A Society for People', in Norman MacKenzie (ed.), *Conviction* (London, 1958), p. 119.

[53] E. P. Thompson, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals', in *Universities & Left Review* (Spring, 1957), p. 33.

The Antinomies of New Leftism

From the beginning, then, new leftism was premised on the recognition of an essential duality, or *tension,* emanating from its very core; as Michael Rustin would later observe, it stood for 'both an assertion of the new and an insistence on continuity':[54] At one level, an avowed intention to 'rehabilitate the rational, humane and libertarian strand within the Communist tradition', was met with an equally pronounced desire to find 'new ways of looking… [and] new ways of speaking together.'[55] To some this is best envisaged as a straightforward clash 'between [a] modernist universalism and postmodern pluralism… between the desire for wholeness and the desire for rupture and change.'[56] Whilst such a characterisation perhaps helps to explain the peculiarly fractious, indeed, at times, downright *antagonistic*, nature of certain subsequent new-left debates, it can also serve to promote an overly-simplistic rendering of the early new-left 'project' as one stymied from the start by a pernicious, and ultimately irreconcilable, *internal* conflict between so-called 'progressives' and 'traditionalists' – or as Samuel once characterised it: 'the struggle between Ancients and Moderns which fragmented the first New Left (1957 – 62)'.[57]

As it was, the 'tensions' that permeated the early phase of the New Left were 'much more complex than this simple opposition suggests'.[58] Indeed, as already suggested, a central appeal of early new leftism stemmed from its 'refusal' of such reductive binary oppositions, whether the either/or routines of mainstream British political discourse, or the cold-war ideological 'polarisation of human consciousness which… corresponded to the polarisation of world power.'[59] As Thompson conceived it,

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[54] Quoted in Tessa Bird and Tim Jordan, 'Sounding Out New Social Movements and the Left: Interview with Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Michael Rustin', in Tim Jordan and Adam Lent (eds.), *Storming the Millennium: The New Politics of Change* (London 1999), p. 196.

[55] E. P. Thompson, 'A Psessay in Ephology', in *New Reasoner*, No. 10 (Autumn, 1959), p. 8; Stuart Hall, 'In the No Man's Land', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 3 (Winter, 1958), p. 86.

[56] Susan Brook, *Literature and Cultural Criticism in the 1950s: The Feeling Male Body* (London 2007), p. 16. Correspondingly, writing in 1960, Ken Coates suggested that '[t]he ambivalence of the New Left' stemmed from the fact that it had still 'not yet chosen between Prometheus and Adam', between those '[hankering] after a return ticket to Eden', and those '[plotting] to storm heaven.' (Ken Coates, 'The 'New Left' in Britain', in *The Listener* p. 564.)

[57] Raphael Samuel, 'Philosophy Teaching By Example': Past and Present in Raymond Williams', in *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Spring 1989), p. 141.

[58] Hall, 'Life and Times', p. 195.

[59] Thompson, 'Outside the Whale', p. 144.

perhaps even more than through their ostensible political affiliations, *new* leftists were to be identified by their 'commitment' to the principle that 'opposing tendencies and potentialities can interpenetrate within the same tradition'.[60] Indeed, 'the confluence of the dissident Communist impulse with the left socialist tradition of the West and with the post-war generation', represented, not only *the* 'crucial question', but also the historic conjuncture at which 'the New Left [could] be found.'[61] Equally, for Hall, what ' [distinguished] a *real* [new-left] response from a superficial *reaction*', was 'a stubbornness, a doggedness, a sense of the continuing struggle called for *in the person who responds*, a certain stamina and perseverance, and a permanent *openness…*'[62]

Such principles derived from what many early new leftists clearly recognised as an essential duality and tension within human nature itself – a recognition that arguably owed as much to a native corpus, or 'tradition', of socially conscious or humanist writing and thought, as it did to the recently 'rediscovered' early manuscripts of Marx.[63] Thus for early socialists like William Morris, the primary interest in Marxism-Socialism lay in its elucidation of 'the age-old contradiction between the unfolding possibilities of life and their negation', through the false distortions of 'class oppression' […] the contradiction between man's boundless desire and the necessary limitations imposed by his environment and nature.'[64] 'We are not only creatures of light', D. H. Lawrence observed early in the century: 'We are also alive in corruption and death… From our bodies comes the issue of corruption as well as the issue of creation.'[65] Correspondingly, if mankind was 'ever going to be free', Lawrence insisted, it would first be 'necessary' for him 'to balance the dark against

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[60] Thompson, 'Agency and Choice', in *The New Reasoner*, No. 5 (Summer 1958), p. 106.

[61] Thompson, 'The New Left', p. 7.

[62] Stuart Hall, 'Something to Live For', in *Encore*, No. 21, (September – October 1959), reprinted in Charles Marowitz, Tom Milne & Owen Hale, *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama* (London, 1965), p. 12. [Emphasis added]

[63] It is perhaps worth noting that this peculiar tension has itself been suggested as the defining experience of 'modern' consciousness. Thus as the neurotic protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) suggests, to be modern is to be 'conscious every moment in myself of many, very many elements absolutely opposite to [pure elemental feeling]'; it is to feel 'them positively swarming in me, these opposite elements.' Elsewhere, Marshall Berman point out how in the visions of 'the greatest modernists', 'affirmative and life sustaining force[s]… [are] always interwoven with assault and revolt'; 'erotic joy, natural beauty and human tenderness… always locked in mortal embrace with nihilistic rage and despair'. (Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, p. 30.)

[64] Quoted in Thompson, *William Morris*, p. 721.

[65] D. H. Lawrence, 'The Reality of Peace', in *The English Review*, No. 24 (May, 1917), pp. 415 – 422, reprinted in D. H. Lawrence, *Reflections On the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays* (Cambridge, 1988), p. 34.

the light', to 'have [his] being in both' – 'Either we can and will understand the other thing that we are, the flux of darkness and lively decomposition, and so become free and whole, or we fight shy of this half of ourselves, as man has always fought shy of it, and gone under the burden of secret shame and self-abhorrence.'[66]

Such influences not only imbued new leftists with a heady sense of their public role *as* intellectuals, it also seemed to necessitate a peculiarly *personal* sense of responsibility to heighten, or 'live out', the tensions and contradictions engendered by 'the forms of life in *this* society'.[67] In this, they drew further inspiration from those thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – Morris, Lawrence, and, not least, Marx himself – who had 'preferred the longer and more arduous task of working through the tensions of our inevitably contradictory judgements' about modern society, 'to some at least makeshift contemporary solution.'[68] Man was 'part agent, part victim', but it was 'precisely the element of agency which distinguishes [him] from the beasts, which is the human part of man, and which it is the business of our consciousness to increase.'[69] With each increase in consciousness, 'as history unfolds… there is a constantly developing *human potential* which the false consciousness and distorted relations of class society deny full realisation.'[70] As such, 'a great part of the work of socialist intellectuals', it was suggested, lay in 'helping people to become aware of the vast human potentialities – economic, intellectual, spiritual – denied or frustrated by capitalist society…'[71]As Peter Sedgwick would later observe, '[t]he confrontation of these extremes took place as much *within* individuals as *between* them'.[72]

Arguably, then, those critics who choose to fix their sights on the early New Left's apparent, inability, or failure, to overcome the 'ambiguous', 'paradoxical', and 'contradictory' elements within its ranks have missed the point; *ambiguity*, associated as it was with undogmatic intellectual exploration, improvisation, humility, and 'a permanent openness', was *the* point.

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[66] Lawrence, 'The Reality of Peace', p. 34.
[67] Hall, 'Something to Live For', p. 113.
[68] Taylor, 'Alienation and Community', p. 11.
[69] Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism', p. 122.
[70] Ibid., p. 124.
[71] Thompson, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals', p. 34
[72] Sedgwick, 'The Two New Lefts', p. 15.

Between Aspiration and Actuality

In projecting their alternative future it has often been suggested that early new leftists catastrophically misread their chances of snatching a 'socialist' victory from the jaws of what was elsewhere contemporaneously being heralded as 'last-stage capitalism'.[73] Thus Lin Chun describes how 'the [early] New Left radically underestimated the grave obstacles to their alternative way';[74] Blackledge claims that 'both the New Left and CND became casualties of shared overly optimistic hopes for the radicalisation of the Labour Party';[75] whilst Dennis Dworkin asserts that early New Left projections were 'founded on erroneous assumptions about the instability of advanced capitalist social formations'.[76]

However, whilst clearly struck by what they saw as the extraordinary potential contained in the 'precious historical moment', few of the thinkers examined here can be shown to have exhibited any grand delusions about the likelihood of their achieving even modest political success: '[This] is a calculated risk', observed the first issue of the *ULR* in Spring 1957, 'and the success or failure of [the] venture depends on the degree of frankness which can be assumed between editors writers and readers [...] Those who feel that the values of a capitalist society are bankrupt, that the social inequalities upon which the system battens are an affront to the potentialities of the individual, have before them a problem, more intricate and more difficult than any which has previously been posed.'[77] Though the transition to a more assertive 'movementist' agenda at the end of the 1950s, sometimes seemed to revolve around an assumption that British society, as it entered the 1960s, might somehow be poised

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[73] See John Strachey, *Contemporary Capitalism* (London 1956).

[74] Chun, *The British New Left*, p. 56.

[75] Paul Blackledge, 'The Unknown Alasdair MacIntyre' in Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (eds.), *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement With Marxism* (Leiden 2005), p. *xxiii*.

[76] Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism*, p. 72. Like Anderson before him, Dworkin reserves particular ire for E. P. Thompson's insufficiently self-critical, utopian projections: 'Thompson's passionate yearning for political change', Dworkin tell us, 'stood in the way of his analysis of the real possibilities', whilst his fervently expressed exhortations towards cultural renewal, 'seriously underestimated the ability of institutions that reproduced the dominant ideology – such as the media to appropriate and neutralize countervailing forces.'

[77] Stuart Hall, Gabriel Pearson, Ralph Samuel & Charles Taylor, 'Editorial' in *Universities and Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1957), pp. 1 – 2.

on the brink of a significant moral or cultural 'awakening' – a popular (or *generational*) repudiation of post-war political and the reductive ideological distortions of the Cold War – what emerges more frequently is the extent to which new leftists always remained aware of how tentative and precarious their own position continued to be. As Hall would later suggest, building a *new* left 'meant coming to terms with the depressing experiences of both 'actual existing socialism' and 'actual existing social democracy'';[78] thus, as his opening editorial for the *NLR* in January 1960 posed the question: 'We have come through 200 years of capitalism and 100 years of imperialism. Why should people – naturally – turn to socialism?'[79]

Correspondingly, the cultural and intellectual 'space' that early new leftists looked to both carve out and occupy often appears as one perpetually poised between extremes of hope and extremes of despair: 'On the one hand', it was suggested, 'almost within man's grasp is a life richer and more satisfying than any known before'; on the other, however, lay continuing human alienation, ideological distortion, greed, moral corruption, and 'the appalling destruction of atomic war.'[80] Whilst it was recognised that, within post-war Western societies, 'the material and technological means for complete human freedom – a freedom within which man could develop a true individuality and a true consciousness of himself and his possibilities… [were] *almost at hand*', it was also noted that 'the structure of human social and moral relationships', appeared to be 'in complete contradiction' to any such realisation; thus any 'material advances' would have to be reckoned against the 'quality' of the total human life upon which such 'advances' were made.[81] ' [*A*]*re* we strong enough to do this work', asked a *ULR* editorial in 1958, 'to take the ideas upon ourselves, to make them exist in our lives, and so to carry them forward?'[82] 'Can we succeed', Thompson asked elsewhere, 'as the Chartists for a time succeeded in binding together old and new into a movement of the overwhelming majority of the people?'[83]

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[78] Hall, 'Life and Times' p. 185.
[79] Stuart Hall, 'Introducing NLR' in *New Left Review*, No. 1 (January 1960), p. 2. Indeed, Hall would later claim that he 'had never subscribed to the illusion that 'actual existing socialism' was, or looked likely to deliver for its people, the real thing. It always seemed to me a horrendously tragic detour.' (See Stuart Hall & Ernesto Laclau, 'Coming Up For Air', in *Marxism Today* (March 1990), p. 23.)
[80] E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary* (London 1955, 1976), p. 843.
[81] Hall, 'A Sense of Classlessness', p. 31.
[82] Unsigned ,'Editorial' in *Universities and Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer 1958), p. 1.
[83] Thompson, 'Revolution Again!', p. 25.

The Aetiology of the British New Left

As suggested above, it is widely acknowledged that the British New Left primarily emerged as a response to a contemporary political and cultural atmosphere or 'mood' distinguished by generalised 'apathy' and 'consensus' on the domestic front, and rapidly developing crisis and repression on the international scene: at one sight, the Cold War was seen to '[dominate] the political horizon, positioning everyone and polarizing every topic by its remorseless binary logic';[84] from another perspective, the growing sense that 'Keynesian capitalism had eliminated mass unemployment and allowed a steady increase in the material standard of living of the working-class [had] appeared to annul the *positive* case for socialism.'[85] Correspondingly, to many observers, the Labour Party's loss at the 1951 General Election seemed to signal the abandonment of Britain's tentative post-war experiment with 'socialistic' policies, in favour of a Conservative leadership more willing to ride-the-wave of post-austerity economic upturn.

If anything, by the mid-1950s, the long-term prospects for British socialists appeared to be even more bleak: not only was the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in increasing disarray, having lost both its parliamentary seats and 30,000 of its members since 1945, but, perhaps even more disconcertingly, following another decisive election defeat in May 1955, the Labour Party itself seemed to be undergoing a period of renewed introspection and constitutional revision, not least, over its commitment to the principles of public ownership.[86] As Stuart Hall, newly arrived in Britain from Jamaica in 1951, would later reflect: 'There was no 'mass' British political movement of the left or major popular political issue to which one could attach oneself. The choice seemed to be between a Labour Party which, at that moment was deeply committed to an Atlanticist world-view, and the outer darkness of the far left.'[87]

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[84] Hall, 'Life and Times', p. 180.
[85] Anderson, 'The Left in the Fifties', p. 4.
[86] The final results revealed the Conservatives as having won 324 out of a total 630 seats, giving them their largest majority – 60 seats – for five years. Figures quoted in Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism*, p. 16.
[87] Hall, 'Life and Times', p.180.

In this context, what Hall himself identifies as the 'conjuncture of 1956' – invariably broken down into the tripartite 'shocks' of 'Suez', 'Hungary' and Khrushchev's 'secret speech' to the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union – has proven highly alluring to historians of various stripes looking to establish their liminal points of entry or exit. In Britain, so the prevailing narrative goes, '1956', not only served to blow apart the oppressive ideological grip of Stalinism, ushering in a new era of leftist intellectual enquiry and rediscovery; but, in the form of Anthony Eden's 'sordid and incompetent' intervention in Egypt – 'the last *folie de grandeur* of an imperialism which was already outdated in its ambitions and methods' – it also viscerally exposed the anachronistic complacency and moral decrepitude extant within Britain's antiquated political 'Establishment'.[88]

Correspondingly, to many historians, '1956' has come to stand as the launch pad not only for the British New Left itself, but also, a more discerning, or 'wised-up', post-war generation – 'affluent', suspicious of authority, and disabused of any lingering illusions about Britain's continued preeminence on the world stage.[89] In her 'Chronology of the New Left', Ellen Meiksins Wood states that the 'movement' 'emerged at the point where the anti-Stalinist revulsion after 1956 converged with the rise of 'welfare' and 'consumer' capitalism, which seemed to give a new importance to cultural struggle';[90] Chun tells us 'the circumstances from which the New Left emerged were… roughly speaking, consumer capitalism and the Cold War';[91] Davis explains that '[t]he New Left had its origins amid the dual crisis of 1956';[92] whilst Kenny justifies the 'greater emphasis… given to the events and ideas after 1956' by suggesting that 'the historical conditions in which the New Left operated have been downplayed.'[93]

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[88] Widgery, *The Left in Britain*, p. 47; and Anderson, 'The Left in the Fifties', p. 14.

[89] As Blackledge suggests, 'the conjuncture of 1956… generated its own disillusioned children, who, in Britain, were personified by Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*: many of these youngsters were too critically self-aware to remain loyally attached to a system that had proved itself, in Egypt, as brutal as that which suppressed the revolution in Hungary. Cynical of official politics, this generation provided the base of the New Left.' (Blackledge, 'Learning from Defeat', p. 24).

[90] Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'A Chronology of the New Left and its Successors, Or: Who's Old Fashioned Now?', in *Socialist Register*, Vol. 31, (London, 1995), p. 22.

[91] Chun, *The British New Left*, pp. 1 – 2.

[92] Davis, 'The Origins of the British New Left', p. 45.

[93] Kenny, *The First New Left*, p. 6.

In many ways such emphases are unsurprising; as suggested above, an equivalent preoccupation with the 'unique' atmosphere, or 'mood', of the post-1956 world was after all central to the early New Left's own efforts to promote itself as a *new* and *distinct* intervention on the British political scene.[94] Nor, indeed, is it easy to overstate the impact of that year's events on leftist movements and individuals around the world; as Eric Hobsbawm would later recall, for British communists, the fallout from 1956, beginning with the leaking of Khrushchev's 'revelations' of Stalinist atrocities ('the second ten days that shook the world'), amounted to nothing less than 'the most serious and critical situation the [British Communist] Party [had been] in since its foundation' – a period in which 'British communists lived on the edge of the political equivalent of a collective nervous breakdown.'[95] Equally for, Thompson: '['1956'] was, not only a particular historical eventuation, but also one of the ultimate disasters of the human mind and conscience, a terminus of the spirit, a disaster area in which every socialist profession of 'good faith' was blasted and burned up.'[96]

Yet whilst the centrality of '1956' should not be overlooked, it is equally important that its significance be understood within a proper historical context. As Dorothy Thompson reminds us, '1956 did not burst on an unprepared world and turn

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[94] See, for example, Thompson (ed.), *Out of Apathy*, (London 1961).

[95] As late as 2002, Hobsbawm could suggest that, 'even after half a century my throat contracts as I recall the almost intolerable tensions under which we lived month after month.' Reflecting on the historical significance of the speech, Hobsbawm wrote: 'I cannot think of any comparable event in the history of any major ideological or political movement. To put it in the simplest terms, the October Revolution created a world communist movement, the Twentieth Congress destroyed it.' (Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, pp. 201 - 206.) Thompson would later 'recall friends who were actually broken (as many of their analogues in the Labour movement were broken by the experience of this period. There were so many ways to retire – into mere apathy, into erudite specialisms, into the defensive rhetoric of Communist dogma, into Parliament or antique shops of academic careerism.' (Thompson, 'The Long Revolution', p. 27.)
Khrushchev's speech had been delivered to a 'secret session' of Russian-only delegates on February 25th 1956. The earlier 'open' sessions of the Congress had already emphasised the 'negative' effects of Stalin's 'cult of the individual' and the breakdown of collective leadership, but it was in the final session that Khrushchev disclosed the full systematic brutality of the Stalinist regime. The main points of the speech were rapidly 'leaked' and printed in, a host of European publications, including the London-based *Daily Worker*. Its effect, to employ Tony Judt's metaphor, was to shatter 'the mirror', in which the European Left had, hitherto, viewed itself. (Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London 2005), p. 322.) For more on the political and *personal* ramifications of 1956, see the articles by John Saville, Malcolm MacEwen, Margot Heinemann, Mervyn Jones, Bill Lomax Ken Coates, and Ralph Miliband in *The Socialist Register*, Vol. 13 (London 1976); John Saville, 'Edward Thompson, The Communist Party and 1956' in, *Socialist Register* (London 1994), pp. 21 – 22; Eric Hobsbawm & Gareth Stedman Jones, '1956' in, *Marxism Today* (November 1986), pp. 16 – 23; Stan Newens, 'Memories of a Seminal Year', in *International Socialism*, No. 112 (October 2006) and the symposium, 'Remembering 1956', in *History Workshop Journal*, No. 62 (Autumn 2006) pp. 172 – 213.

[96] Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory', p. 331.

politically convinced people into critics and dissidents.'[97] As it is, the tendency in some accounts to present the year as constituting a kind of cultural or ideological 'ground zero' upon which new leftists (amongst others) promptly set about envisioning the 'brave new world' of the 1960s is highly misleading. As Hall would later suggest: 'The response to '1956' and the formation of a New Left could not have occurred without [a] prior period of 'preparation', in which a number of people slowly gained the confidence to engage in a dialogue which questioned the terms of orthodox political argument and cut across existing organizational boundaries.'[98] Similarly, for Raymond Williams the 'break-out' of 1956 'was only the climax of a longer history of democratic opposition' – a history whose ultimate significance far transcended the relatively inconsequential fortunes of British Communism.[99] Indeed, in William's view, it was the break with Communism that at last made it possible for 'energies', that for too long, 'had been locked up in the [Party] apparatus', to '[invigorate] the traditional and non-aligned British Labour Left.'[100] Samuel would later claim that for those who has been left effectively 'faithless' by the events of 1956, the emergence of a *new* left in Britain appeared to offer the promise of a kind of 'born-again socialism'; nevertheless, as Thompson would suggest elsewhere, 'to be born again did not mean renouncing [one's] own parentage.'[101] Indeed, much of the gamble, or *conceit*, of the men and women who went on to improvise a *new* left response to the crisis of 1956, lay in their refusal to throw either the 'socialist', *or* the 'Marxist' baby out with the vast tide of Stalinist-Communist bathwater.

Being Communist

As Eric Hobsbawm once observed, 'the question why communism attracted so many of the best men and women of my generation, and what being communists meant to

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[97] Thompson, 'On the Trail', p. 95.

[98] Hall, 'Life and Times', p. 180.

[99] Raymond Williams, 'The New British Left', in *Partisan Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Spring 1960), p. 343.

[100] Ibid., p. 343.

[101] See Raphael Samuel, 'Born-again Socialism', in Archer et al, *Out of Apathy*, pp. 11 – 38; E. P. Thompson, 'Romanticism, Moralism and Utopianism: The Case of William Morris', in *New Left Review*, No. 99 (September-October 1976), p. 105. As Harry Hanson commented in 1957: 'I felt no temptation to acquire a brand new, or purified, faith for fear of appearing ideologically naked in public. For I did not leave the Party because I thought I 'knew better' than my comrades or because I had convinced myself that I was the possessor of a 'guide to action' superior to theirs, but simply because I was morally outraged.' (Harry Hanson, 'An Open Letter to Edward Thompson', in *The New Reasoner*, No. 2 (Autumn 1957), p. 79.

us, has to be a central theme in the history of the twentieth century.'[102] It is important to emphasise, however, that the personal motivations that lay behind the decision to become communist in the 1930s and 1940s were almost certainly as diverse as the different social and cultural backgrounds of those who opted to do so. Put simply, communism no more 'attracted a particular type' of personality or individual than say membership of the Conservative or Labour Party did in the same period; as was the case in mainland Europe, British Communists 'came from a wide sample of the population.'[103] Nevertheless, conceivably, those 'who became communists before the war, and especially before 1935', can be viewed in a rather different light from those who did so in the years either immediately prior, and especially *after*, 1956. As Saville would later insist, 'to dismiss the Communist experience' in the years prior to 1956 as a straightforward 'folly', based on some perpetual human weakness or susceptibility, 'is to seriously misunderstand – indeed fundamentally to misunderstand – what it meant in global political terms, in the national politics of individual countries and within the individuals themselves who played their minor parts in the historical experience.'[104] For such individuals, communism was nothing if not foremost 'profound personal choice', and 'something to which we intended to dedicate our lives.'[105]

Whilst the British Communist Party never seriously looked like becoming 'a mass-party like others in Europe, it was nevertheless grounded in a uniquely long-established and strong labour-movement.'[106] Since its establishment in 1920, the Communist Party of Great Britain had struggled to garner more than a few thousand members. By the mid-1930s, however, rocked by the rapid ascendancy of fascism in Germany and the Nazi Party's violent suppression of the German Communist Party, the CPGB had allied itself with an international 'popular front' of various progressive groups and individuals united against fascism. John Strachey's *The Coming Struggle for Power* (1932), 'a book that anyone concerned with politics… was expected to read', prophesised that the ensuing two decades would provide the setting for a

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[102] Ibid., p. 127.
[103] John Saville, 'The Communist Experience', in *Socialist Register*, Vol. 27 (London, 1991), p. 10.
[104] Ibid., p. 7.
[105] Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 129.
[106] Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'The Enlightenment, Postmodernism, and the Post-'New Left'', in Larry Patriquin (ed.), *The Ellen Meiksins Wood Reader* (Leiden & Boston, 2012), pp. 241 – 242.

decisive clash between East and West.[107] As Hobsbawm later described it, in such a context, the young men and women who became embroiled in leftist politics and causes did not so much 'make a commitment against bourgeois society and capitalism, since it patently seemed to be on its last legs', they 'simply chose *a* future rather than *no* future'.[108] By the end of the 1930s, leftist ideas had come to permeate British political life to such an extent that observers could note that leading British political thinkers such as Stafford Cripps, Aneurin Bevan and Harold Laski were clearly 'convinced that capitalism was facing inevitable collapse', whilst even moderate politicians like Clement Attlee would employ 'quasi-Marxist slogans when he spoke and wrote.'[109]

Despite this, a perception arguably still lingers 'that young intellectuals in the thirties were drawn towards communism and Marxism for emotional reasons, in search of a vision or a faith.'[110] Yet as Margot Heinemann would later point out: 'Those of us who came from liberal, Labour or religious backgrounds were not short of visions, high ideals of a future without poverty or war. What we lacked and were searching for was a reasoned analysis of the actual terrifying world in which we were living and a rational plan of practical action to change it.'[111]

'What made Marxism so irresistible', Hobsbawm would later reflect, 'was its comprehensiveness. 'Dialectical materialism' provided, if not a 'theory of everything', then at least a 'framework of everything', linking inorganic and organic nature with human affairs, collective and individual, and providing a guide to the nature of all interactions in a world in constant flux'.[112] Moreover, it also appeared to '[demonstrate] with the method of science the certainty of our victory, a prediction [already] tested and verified by the victory of proletarian revolution over one sixth of the earth's surface and the advances of revolution in the 1940s.' [113] Over half a

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[107] Annan, *Our Age*, p. 245.
[108] Eric Hobsbawm, 'Intellectuals and the Class Struggle', in *Revolutionaries* (London 1973), p. 300.
[109] Stanley Rothman, 'British Labor's 'New Left'', in *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (September, 1961), p. 394.
[110] Margot Heinemann, '*Left Review*, *New Writing* and the Broad Alliance Against Fascism', in Edward Timms and Peter Collier (eds.), *Visions and Blueprints: Avant-Garde Culture and Radical Politics in Early Twentieth-Century Europe* (Manchester 1988), p. 113.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 97.
[113] Ibid., p. 137.

century later Saville could still recall 'the intellectual excitement that a discovery of marxism created.'[114]

Francis Mulhern, has recently identified the work of the Communist Party' Historians Group (CPHG) in the late 1940s and early 1950s with 'a systematic effort to define a legitimating national past for communism.'[115] Indeed, to this extent, the preoccupations of the CPHG has sometimes been seen as having achieved a considerable, if ironic, consistency with the more triumphalist 'Whiggish' leanings of so-called 'mainstream' English historical scholarship during this period.[116] Thompson himself acknowledges how the CPHG's leading 'guru', Dona Torr, consistently emphasised 'a great respect for the authentic traditions of the British working class, and British culture.'[117] Indeed, for this reason alone, the work of Torr, as well as A. L. Morton, in particular, should be seen as one of the crucial antecedents of Thompson's own later efforts to trace an indigenous 'tradition' of radical 'struggle from below', from which he hoped the contemporary working class of the 1960s might yet draw inspiration.

We should be wary, however, of those who seek to present the work of CPHG as somehow undermined or compromised by too overt a political agenda. Equally, Bryan Palmer has cautioned against the tendency to assign too great an essentialist or collective identity to British Marxist historiography in this period, though admits that to do so would spare historians the more arduous task of 'exploring sensitively and rigorously experiences of difference and dialogue, in which the actual histories lived

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[114] Saville, 'The Communist Experience', p. 11.

[115] Francis Mulhern, 'Culture and Society, Then and Now', in *New Left Review*, Series II, No. 55 (January-February 2009), p. 35.

[116] See Gareth Stedman Jones, 'Anglo-Marxism, Neo-Marxism and the Discursive Approach to History', in Alf Lüdtke (ed.), *Was bleibt von marxistischen Perspektiven in der Geschichtsforschung?* (Göttingen, 1997), p. 151. Stedman Jones provides a compelling analysis of the somewhat surprising degree of recognition and respect afforded to the CP and Anglo-Marxist historians from both within the history academy and by the wider reading public from the 1950s until the end of the 1970s. 'In contrast to the situation elsewhere', Stedman Jones observes, 'the professional position of… [British Marxist] historians was relatively secure, and their political-intellectual positions relatively untroubled'. At the same time, their '[w]ork in adult education was particularly important because a political commitment to the ideals of adult education helped to nurture a popular and accessible style of writing history, which in the 1960s and 1970s was to lead to large readerships and an extensive diffusion of their ideas.' (pp. 153 – 154).

[117] Quoted in Andrew Whitehead, 'An Interview with E. P. Thompson' 1 December, 1991, transcript available at http://www.andrewwhitehead.net/ep-and-dorothy-thompson.html, accessed, 10 May, 2013 at 1.30, p.m.

as well as written abound in complexities relevant for our times.'[118]As it is Miles Taylor finds that Morton's *People's History of England* (1938), 'actually said very little about the 'people' making their own history from below, but instead inserted the 'masses' or 'working classes' into a more traditional history of the development of the British state', whilst G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate's, *The Common People: 1746 – 1938* (1938), seemed to be more 'preoccupied with the growth of an enlightened working class opinion rather than with providing a radical version of the national past.'[119]

As Hobsbawm would later reflect '[t]he historical interests of most Marxist historians [in this period] were not so much in the base – the economic infrastructure – as in the relations of base and superstructure.'[120] Thompson too would later recall how Party historians were notable for 'striking out in an independent line, developing their own analysis'[121] This 'formal and informal exchange with fellow socialists', Thompson would later suggest, 'helped me more than anything I had found in Cambridge University…'[122] Not least, it had helped to convince him of the fundamental need for '[s]ocialist intellectuals to occupy some territory which is without qualification their own'; to have a 'space' comprising 'their own journals, their own theoretical and practical centers; places where no one works for grades or tenure but for the transformation of society; places where criticism and self-criticism are fierce, but also mutual help and the exchange of theoretical and practical knowledge; places which prefigure in some ways the society of the future.'[123]

As we have seen, then, Communism offered the possibility of being 'deeply committed even to the point of life itself in support of a particular political struggle which was at the same time a popular struggle.'[124] 'To *be* a Communist was to have a complete social identity, one which transcended the limits of class, gender,

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[118] Bryan D. Palmer, 'Reasoning Rebellion: E. P. Thompson, British Marxist Historians, and the Making of Dissident Political Mobilization', in *Labour/Le Travail*, Vol. 50 (Autumn, 2002), p. 215.
[119] Miles Taylor, 'Patriotism, History and the Left in Twentieth-Century Britain', in *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (December, 1990), p. 979.
[120] Hobsbawm, 'History: A New Age of Reason', p. 2.
[121] Quoted in Whitehead, 'An Interview with E. P. Thompson'
[122] Quoted in Henry Abelove, Betsy Blackmar, Peter Dimock, and Jonathan Schneer (eds.), *Visions of Hisory* (Manchester, 1983), p. 13.
[123] Ibid., p. 23.
[124] Ibid., p. 11.

nationality.'[125] For those like Hobsbawm, it 'would not have struck any of us as surprising that the last words of a dying Party member should be for the Party, for Stalin and for the Comrades… The Party was what our life was about. We gave it all we had. In return, we got from it the certainty of our victory and the experience of fraternity.'[126]

Nevertheless, as intoxicating as this 'total commitment' could be, it was, unsurprisingly, on a personal level, also 'extremely demanding'.[127] '[T]he Party's work came before everything that was personal.'[128]There was an 'absolute obligation to follow the line it proposed'[129] 'The Party… had the first, or more precisely the only real claim on our lives. Its demands had absolute priority.'[130]As Samuel would later describe:

> It required one to be politically active. It prohibited, or at the very least inhibited, any independent engagement with the outside world. It allowed no space for nuances: people were either 'true' to the Party, or, in one of our ugliest phrases, they 'ratted'… a good Party member was expected to speak in Party codes and act in Party ways […] The comradeship of the Party was neither exactly personal nor entirely political, but a nexus of the two.[131]

Correspondingly, '[t]o have a serious relationship with someone who was not in the Party or prepared to join it (or rejoin it) was unthinkable'; equally, 'if the Party ordered you to abandon your lover or spouse, you did so.'[132]

Malcolm MacEwen, who began 1956 as a journalist on the *Daily Worker* recalls how 'uncritical adulation of the USSR had become a source of increasing irritation to several member of the editorial staff' even long before the 'revelations' of

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[125] Raphael Samuel, 'Faith, Hope and Struggle: The Lost World of British Communism – Part One', in *New Left Review*, No. 154 (November – December 1985), p. 11.
[126] Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 134.
[127] Raphael Samuel, 'Staying Power: The Lost World of British Communism – Part Two', in *New Left Review*, No. 156 (March-April 1986), p. 69.
[128] Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 135.
[129] Ibid., p. 134.
[130] Ibid., p. 137.
[131] Samuel, 'Staying Power', p. 69.
[132] Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 135.

Khrushchev's speech were made public.[133] Thompson would later recall how by the beginning of the 1950s, 'the very texture of political life…' seemed to have become 'oppressive – the endless committee work, ineffectual campaigns under mendacious national leadership, electoral contests with unworthy candidates.'[134] Correspondingly, Raymond Challinor, the editor of the *Socialist Review*, would later recall private discussions with Thompson dating as far back as 1950, in which the latter had freely voiced his 'doubts about the latest Stalinist encyclicals on subjects like Lysenko and linguistics'; indeed, Challinor suggests, as Thompson's historical awareness 'of the British working class grew greater and greater he found it an increasing problem to reconcile the wisdom he had acquired with the inanities of Stalinism. The thought control the Communist Party sought to impose was deeply repugnant, a violation of his very being.'[135]

Yet, as Thompson himself would subsequently acknowledge, the idea of admitting one's personal 'doubts' outside of a few private discussions with one's fellow communists still remained virtually inconceivable. As such, 'Western Marxists', he suggested in 1957, had been increasingly obliged to '[develop] a kind of split mentality'; whilst, '[o]n one hand they… tried to develop creatively the flexible 'ideas of movement' of Marx and Engels; on the other they… [refused] to face the fact the Stalinism spoke in a different tongue.'[136] A sense of this almost schizophrenic duplicity is provided by Doris Lessing's remarkable semi-autobiographical novel, *The Golden Notebook*, published in 1962, but set in the years surrounding the events of 1956. In the 'Red Notebook' section, the novel's protagonist, Anna, documents her mounting sense of imposture and absurdity at the 'roles' her Communist commitment appeared to necessitate:

> Had lunch with John, the first time since I joined the Party. Began talking as I do with my ex-party friends, frank acknowledgment of what is going on in Soviet Union. John went into automatic defence of the Soviet Union, very irritating. Yet this

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[133] Malcolm MacEwen, 'The Day the Party Had to Stop' in *Socialist Register*, p. 25.

[134] E. P. Thompson, 'Commitment in Politics', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 6 (Spring 1959), p. 50.

[135] Raymond Challinor, 'Letter' in *Socialist Review* (1993), quoted in Christian Høgsbjerg, 'A 'Trot of the Milder Persuasion': Raymond Challinor's Marxism' in *International Socialism*, No. 141 (Winter 2014), p. 25.

[136] Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism', p. 112.

evening had dinner with Joyce, New Statesman circles, and she started to attack Soviet Union. Instantly, I found myself doing that automatic-defence-of-Soviet-Union act, which I can't stand when other people do it… Fascinating – the roles we play, the way we play parts.[137]

In a later passage Anna, describes how in any political discussion she 'never know[s] what person is going to reply – the dry, wise, ironical political woman, or the Party fanatic who sounds literally quite maniacal.'[138]

Reasoning Rebellion

As Bryan Palmer has observed, *The Reasoner* was 'not intended to create a social movement'; indeed, much of the content across its three issues was still clearly 'premised on a belief that the Communist Party was itself that movement, and that it could be moved away from its leadership's refusals to confront the crises of Stalinism.'[139] Lessing would later recall how most of her 'still… thinking of how to save 'King Street' from itself, still seeing the CP as something that could be reformed and rescued from the baleful influences of the Soviet Union.'[140]

According to Madeleine Davis, 'the nucleus of a 'New Left' project could already be seen in… [Saville and Thompson's] assessment of the priorities for British socialists to 'recreate a much clearer understanding of the character of socialist society – not only in its economic basis but also in its social relations and political institutions, and in its relation to contemporary British conditions'.'[141] However, whilst it can be agreed that such an aim would indeed soon become one of the central pillars of the

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[137] Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (London 1962), pp. 166 – 167.
[138] Ibid., p. 170.
[139] Palmer, 'Reasoning Rebellion', p. 194. In a letter published in *The Reasoner*'s final edition in November 1956, Lessing had argued that the *real* horror of Stalinism was 'not that one man was a tyrant, but that hundreds and thousands of party members, inside and outside the Soviet Union, let go their individual consciences and allowed him to become a tyrant.' For Lessing, the obvious lesson to be drawn from only 'safeguard against tyranny', remained what it had 'always been… to sharpen individuality, to strengthen individual responsibility, and not to delegate it.' (Doris Lessing, 'Letter', in *The Reasoner*, No. 3 (November 1956), p. 12.) It is worth pointing out that Lessing's letter is dated October 19th 1956. Just four days later on October 23rd, the Hungarian Uprising began, culminating in the bloody suppression by Soviet Tanks throughout the first week of November.
[140] Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, p. 191.
[141] Davis, 'The *New Reasoner* and the Early New Left', p. 34. The quote is taken from Saville and Thompson's editorial in the second edition of *The Reasoner* (September 1956), p. 5

early New-Left's reformist programme, it is not clear what distinguishes it as especially *new* in terms of contemporary left-wing thinking in this period. Indeed, by the latter-half of the 1950s numerous socialists, including many who opted to retain their Party cards, were coming to acknowledge the need for fundamental revision and reform: As Norman Harding, a journalist for the *Labour Review*, recalls, by 1957 '[d]iscussion forums where dissident CP members and ex-members along with other groups in the labour movement could discuss the questions that had arisen [since 1956]… had sprung up all over Britain.'[142]

Following the appearance of a second issue of *The Reasoner* in September Saville and Thompson were told to either cease publication or face permanent censure. As Saville picks up the story: 'By the beginning of October we had agreed our policy: to publish the third issue of *The Reasoner* while stating that we were stopping future publication for reasons that we thought were in the best interest of the Party… Then came the first Soviet intervention in Hungary…'[143]

Arguably, the 'official birth' of new leftism in can only be traced as far back as the publication of the third issue of *The Reasoner* in November 1956, and even more specifically, to Thompson's landmark essay, 'Through the Smoke of Budapest'. Not until this point had any of the 'reasoners' openly declared their outright opposition, either to Stalinism, or the British Party leadership who had sought to mask his atrocities: 'It is time we had this out', Thompson's essay begins; '[f]rom start to finish, from February onwards our leadership has sided… with Stalinism.'[144] Even today, nearly sixty years after it was written, the essay still reads like a statement of profound moral awakening. In a particularly notable passage, Thompson inveighs against some of the characteristic elisions and distortions of Stalinist ideology and practice, gradually building momentum, before at last giving free-reign to thoughts and feelings which had clearly been incubating for far longer:

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[142] Norman Harding, *Staying Red: Why I Remain a Socialist* (London 2005), p. 77. Perhaps the most notable example of this broader post-1956 development was the 'Wortley Hall Conference' in Sheffield from April 27th- 28th 1957. For more on 'this very important conference where many of those present took their first step to take different political positions', see the account in Harding, cited above; and Widgery, *The Left in Britain*, p. 78 – 85.

[143] John Saville, 'Edward Thompson, the Communist Party and 1956', in *Socialist Register*, Vol. 30 (London, 1994), p. 30.

[144] E. P. Thompson, 'Through the Smoke of Budapest', in *The Reasoner*, No. 3 (November 1956), p. 2

And the identification of all disagreement, all opposition, all hesitation, with 'objective' counter-revolution is wrong… And the attitude to discussion is wrong…And the theory of the Party is wrong… And the mechanical theory of human consciousness is wrong: the theory that historical science 'can become as precise a science as, let us say, biology'… the subordination of the imaginative and moral faculties to political and administrative authority is wrong: the elimination of moral criteria from political judgement is wrong: the fear of independent thought, the deliberate encouragement of anti-intellectual trends amongst the people is wrong: the mechanical personification of unconscious class forces, the belittling of the conscious process of intellectual and spiritual conflict, *all this is wrong*.[145]

The *New Reasoner* consciously pitched itself against 'the implicit assumption that… he who deviates in this or that way is a traitor to the Good Old Cause…', acknowledging how it was just this kind of 'heresy hunting' that had led to the leftist 'fragmentation that we see around us today.'[146] In a personal letter to Saville on the eve of the first issue in January 1957, Thompson expressed concern that his colleague's vision for the journal was still 'too concerned with a respectful intellectual audience', emphasising how 'the chief thing I want in this journal is *attack*':

I want specialists who write in such a way that serious non-specialists can not only understand what they mean, but (if the subject requires it) can be stimulated, roused or moved by what they say. This is NOT the learned or academic tradition; it IS the tradition of a certain sort of politico-cultural journalism (Swift and Hazlitt) in Britain.[147]

From early on, the *New Reasoner* was notable for the multi-disciplinary background of its respective contributors; thus, within its covers could be found writing by historians (Saville, Hilton, Thompson and Hobsbawm) creative writers (Lessing and Randall Swingler) economists (Michael Barratt Brown, Alfred Dressler and Ronald Meek) anthropologists (Peter Worsley) political theorists (Ralph Miliband), and

[145] Thompson, 'Through the Smoke of Budapest', p. 2 [Emphasis added].
[146] John Saville, quoted in 'Letter to Our Readers', in *New Reasoner* No. 5 (Summer 1958), p. 131.
[147] Letter from Thompson to Saville, January 9th 1957, quoted in Davis, 'The *New Reasoner* and the Early New Left', p. 35.

scientists (D. G. Arnott). By the time of its tenth and final edition in late 1959, no fewer than 165 different signatories had given their name to *New Reasoner* articles.[148] Dorothy Thompson would later recall how

> Like the original *Left Review* the *New Reasoner* was from the beginning a journal of creative writing as well as of political and academic articles… two of the six-member editorial board, Doris Lessing and Randall Swingler, were creative writers. All the artwork was done by Paul Hogarth, while James Friell and James Boswell were among those who drew sketches and cartoons, and the journal regularly published poems and translations as well as short stories.[149]

Correspondingly, Sheila Rowbotham has recalled how, having first come across it as a teenager in the early 1960s, she 'was to spend the rest of her life looking for a journal like the *New Reasoner*, where Karl Marx and William Blake could meet between two covers.'[150]

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that all who wrote for the journal were *fully-fledged* 'new leftists'; indeed, to work one's way chronologically through the ten issues of the *New Reasoner*, is to bear witness (sometimes even within a single article!) to a complex process of negotiation as 'old left' habits and modes, slowly cede to the emergence of a more discernibly *new* leftist voice and attitude.[151] Correspondingly, reflecting on the character of *New Reasoner* in the early 1960s, Williams would observe how even at the time of its final edition in late 1959, most of the 'inner' tensions were 'still unresolved'; indeed, in Williams' mind, a considerable quantity of *New Reasoner*'s content 'was still much too involved in arid fights' between 'the Party Marxists', even to the extent that is was sometimes as if 'nothing at all seem to have changed.'[152] Similarly in 1961, the literary critic of *Marxism Today*, Arnold Kettle, was claiming that 'to turn over the pages of the *New Reasoner*

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[148] Figure quoted in Palmer, 'Reasoning Rebellion', p. 194.
[149] Thompsom, 'On the Trail', pp. 97 – 98.
[150] Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream: A Memoir of the Sixties* (London 2000), p. 64. For the fullest sense of the *New Reasoner*'s distinctive character and trajectory see, Palmer, 'Reasoning Rebellion', pp. 194 – 211.
[151] Hobsbawm would later suggest that in his general sensibility Saville himself always 'remained… decidedly 'Old Left''(Eric Hobsbawm, 'John Saville: Obituary' in, *The Guardian* (16 June 2009), p. 31.)
[152] Williams, 'The New British Left', p. 344.

today is to be carried back merely into a rather quaint (if historically interesting) little backwater of the past.'[153] Nevertheless, Williams also suggested that within its pages could also be found 'signs of socialist *thinking* again, in the terms of actual contemporary British life', and this he suggested, 'was the valuable strand.'[154]

Universities and Left Review

The *ULR* grew out of discussions in the Oxford Socialist Club, 'a moribund organization left more or less abandoned since its thirties Popular Front days'.[155] Amongst the items listed in Ken Vaughan's handwritten minutes for a meeting held, on January 20th 1957 is the proposal for a new 'Universities periodical called *Universities and Left Review*' – 'Under the Editorship of Raphael Samuel, another ex-Balliol man now studying at the London School of Economics', the minutes reveal, how the new publication was 'to be a 'left-wing, non sectarian' magazine designed along similar lines to the *Spectator*, and devoting nearly half its space to book-reviews, drama and film criticism.'[156] The first half of its 'cumbersome and extremely uncommercial title' was intended to court the interest of other dissident student groups, whilst the latter half invoked the defunct *Left Review* of the 1930s.[157] Setting out its distinct 'Character and Appeal' in 1957, the first edition of the *ULR* declared: 'We do not offer another political platform of the left. We don't think that would be nearly as valuable as the sort of forum for left ideas so lacking on the British left today. It's in order to provide this, that we are not tying ourselves to any organization.'[158]

The *ULR* soon emerged as the focal point for Oxford's small but diverse socialist community, a somewhat incongruous blend of former Communists, Labour Club

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[153] Arnold Kettle, 'On the 'New Left': A Reply to Discussion', in *Marxism Today* (June 1961), p. 191.

[154] Williams, 'The New British Left', p. 344.

[155] Hall, 'Life and Times', The Socialist Club had been given new life after the Oxford Communist Club had been dissolved in November 1956 'in protest against Russian aggression in Hungary.' (See the unsigned editorial, 'Repentant Marxists', in *The Times* (November 10th 1956), p. 7.)

[156] Ken Vaughan, 'Minutes of a meeting of the Executive Committee: January 20th 1956', reprinted in 'Document: Minutes of the Oxford University Socialist Club Executive Committee, 17 October – 27 February 1957' in *History Workshop Journal*, No. 62 (?), p. 210. The *ULR* would eventually have four editors: Samuel, Stuart Hall, Gabrielle Pearson and Charles Taylor, with an average age twenty-four. The journal's first edition appeared in the spring of 1957 and included contributions by Isaac Deutscher, G.D.H. Cole, Eric Hobsbawm, Lindsay Anderson, and E. P. Thompson.

[157] Hall, 'Life and Times', p.182.

[158] Unsigned editorial, 'About this Journal', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 1 (Spring 1957), p. 4.

loyalists, Fabians, and self-styled 'independents'. At the centre of this group was Samuel, the leading light in what, pre-1956, had been 'a small group of young communist undergraduates centered around Christopher Hill at Balliol'.[159] Hall would later recall Samuel in this period as 'simultaneously the pariah and the heart-and-soul of the Oxford political scene'; indeed, 'practically nothing of significance happened in Oxford without Raphael being in some way indirectly involved in it.'[160]

In the weeks and months prior to Hungary and Suez, many of those who would subsequently go on to establish the *ULR* had been 'closely involved' in G. D. H. Cole's efforts to set up an 'International Society for Socialist Studies', a prototype for what Cole had proposed as an even more ambitious 'World Order of Socialists', independent of Party or State machinery.[161] As Peter Sedgwick would later recall, '[f]or those… whose baptism into an independent Socialism had to await the series of traumatic events in 1956', Cole's efforts to promote an 'alternative tradition of the Left, upheld… over decades of a frightful isolation' offered a considerable 'source of sustenance and hope.'[162] Indeed, in this sense, Sedgwick would suggest, Cole can be regarded as having been 'engaged in propaganda for a political vision… discernibly similar' to that of the early New Left – '[A] Socialism of decentralized association and active, participatory democracy, whose basic units would be sited at the workplace and in the community rather than in any central apparatus of the State…'[163]

At the time of its seventh and final edition in late 1959, *ULR* was achieving a regular circulation of between seven and eight thousand, and, according to Alasdair MacIntyre, '[had] brought hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of young people into contact with socialist discussion.'[164]

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[159] Stuart Hall, 'Raphael Samuel: 1934 – 1996', in *New Left Review*, No. 221 (January-February 1997), p. 120.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Peter Sedgwick, 'A Return to First Things', in *The Balliol College Annual Record* (Oxford, 1980), p. 87.
[162] Ibid., p. 86.
[163] Ibid.
[164] MacIntyre, 'The 'New Left'', p. 98.

For two years, between early 1957 and late 1959, the editorial boards of the *New Reasoner* and the *ULR* sustained a crucial dialogue: as Norman Birnbaum would characterise it in 1960, whilst the former 'held that our political problems were constant', and so set itself to addressing 'how the transition to a new socialist morality' might be possible, the latter tended towards 'a moral criticism of society', raising the question of 'what a socialist politics would be like.'[165] For many early new leftists, as it was for Birnbaum, '[t]hese differences were useful', helping the two new-left milieus 'to converge on a number of common themes'.[166] As the American writer Clancy Sigal later recalled:

> I certainly felt the continuity of interests between myself, as an American, and the young people who were running *ULR* and the people who were running… *The New Reasoner*… Suddenly the heart of Marxism, which had been stultifying, was broken wide open. I thought we were all engaged in a kind of collective endeavour to recapture the essential idealism, freshness, originality of an idea which had been taken away from us by enemies of promise, by enemies of socialism.[167]

Characterising this early phase of new-left activity for readers of the American periodical, *Partisan Review* in 1960, Raymond Williams recalled 'a glorious and lively muddle, changing in character continuously, full of serious differences within itself, but recognizable as a social mood absolutely different from that obtaining at the beginning of the 1950s.'[168] A 1958 'Letter to Our Readers' in the autumn edition of *New Reasoner* went so far as to suggest how, '[v]ery slowly, and sometimes with more sound than substance, it does seem that a 'new left' is coming into being in this country.'[169] Whilst, as yet, this nascent *new* left still remained 'a mood rather than a movement', it was, nonetheless a consciousness that could now traced amongst 'the most diverse [social] elements':

> [M]embers of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: veteran left-wingers from the unions and 'Tribune' readers: young people shocked by the Notting Hill riots: Victory of Socialism supporters: anti-Establishment crusaders from the universities;

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[165] Birnbaum, 'Foreword', pp. *ix – x*.
[166] Ibid., p. *x*.
[167] Clancy Sigal, quoted in 'Conference Scrapbook', in Archer et al, *Out of Apathy*, p. 133.
[168] Williams, 'The New British Left', p. 346.
[169] Unsigned, 'Letter to Our Readers' (I), p. 137.

> dissident Communists, striking new roots in the labour movement. It stretches from G. D. H. Cole to John Homer, and from Bill Jones, the busmen's leader, to Lindsay Anderson, film-maker and critic.[170]

Announcing the launch of the *NLR* towards the end of 1959 Thompson offered his own distinctive summary of the previous three years' developments, and their possible implications for the future of British politics and society: if nothing else, he suggested, '[t]he existence of our journals' had demonstrated 'that a great many younger people – and not only intellectuals' were now 'deeply concerned with genuine issues of political and moral principle... despite the market research routines of professional politics.'[171] 'There is nothing more contemptible in the political life of contemporary Britons than the assumption that politics is concerned not with agitating and changing opinions, not with defending any principle, but with giving the electors what the mass media have told them they want.'[172]

Forging a Movement?

The numerous tensions and difficulties that dogged the early New Left's attempts to forge itself into a more coherent and *organised* 'movement' between late 1959 and early 1961 have been well documented elsewhere – not least, in the New Left's own journals and publications.[173] In advancing reasons for what is generally regarded as this project's relatively sudden demise in the early 1960s, historians have tended to place considerable emphasis on the union of the *New Reasoner* and *ULR* into the singular *NLR* in late 1959. Thus Palmer suggests that 'the seeds of discontent' that would eventually blow the New Left apart 'were sown in the very conception of the merger';[174] Kenny claims that the union was 'characterised, from its inception, by internal divisions which were impossible to resolve';[175] whilst Ellen Meiksins Wood,

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[170] Ibid.

[171] E. P. Thompson, 'Labour and the New Left', in *The Guardian* (2 November, 1959), p. 4.

[172] Thompson, 'Labour and the New Left', p. 4.

[173] See, for example, the 'Editorials' and 'Letters/Notes to Our Readers', a regular feature of early New Left publications. For more on the strictly organisational difficulties associated with the early New Left see, Chun, *The British New Left*; Kenny, *The First New Left*, pp.23 - 49; and Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect*, pp. 1 – 9.

[174] Palmer, 'Reasoning Rebellion', p. 212.

[175] Michael Kenny, 'Communism and the New Left', in Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman and Kevin Morgan (eds.), *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party* (London 1995), p. 205.

argues that the subsequent 'failed marriage' between the *New Reasoner* and the *ULR* appeared to 'capture the essence' of nothing less than 'a historic rupture in the history of the post-war Western Left.'[176]

Certainly the proposition was met with considerable resistance on both sides in the weeks and months building up to the *NLR*'s first edition in January 1960. Whilst *ULR*ers such as Norman Birnbaum, Charles Taylor, and Raphael Samuel all feared the sacrifice of the *ULR*'s distinctive spontaneity and irreverence, *New Reasoner*s like Mervyn Jones, Ralph Miliband and Clancy Sigal ostensibly opposed the merger outright.[177] In Milibands' view the 'rebellion' of 1956 'should have been followed by a sustained and systematic attempt to regroup whoever was willing into a socialist association, league or party, of which the journal [*The New Reasoner*] might have been the voice'.[178] Indeed, two decades later, Miliband was still lamenting his fellow 'reasoners' '[inadequate] perception', that some form of 'socialist organisation was needed, and when there was some kind of perception of it, there was no clear view as to what it should specifically stand for, in programmatic and organisational as well as in theoretical terms.'[179] Writing in the Trotskyist *Labour Review*, Alasdair MacIntyre feared that the merger would signal the loss of the New Left's principal appeal; indeed, for MacIntyre, amongst the New Left's most considerable 'merits', hitherto, had been precisely that it was 'so open a movement'; thus, he hoped it was not 'now endangering itself by becoming constricted within some new orthodoxy.'[180]

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[176] Meiksins Wood, 'The Chronology of the New Left', p. 28.
[177] Hall, 'Raphael Samuel', p. 123; Mervyn Jones, *Chances: An Autobiography* (New York 1987), p. 165.
[178] Ralph Miliband, 'John Saville: A Presentation', in David E. Martin & David Rubinstein (eds.), *Ideology and the Labour Movement: Essays Presented to John Saville* (London 1979), p. 27. On the eve of the *NLR*'s first issue's publication in December 1959, Miliband wrote a deeply personal 'letter of thanks' to Saville and Thompson; whilst he acknowledged that in writing such a potentially 'awkward letter' he ran the risk of '[sounding] a bit embarrassing', he also insisted that what Saville and Thompson had 'done for [him]' needed saying:

> In effect you have given me the sense of socialist comradeship (I said it would be embarrassing) which I have not had before, save perhaps in early student days. You have both made me feel that, beside the sense of belonging to a movement, I was also involved in a personal comradeship with people who had more experience than I, who could share in a direct way the political worries I have, who spoke my language and who also welcomed me as one of their number…

He had, Miliband admitted, 'felt deeply involved with [the *New Reasoner*', which, was 'perhaps one reason why… [he] had fought so stubbornly against its disappearance'. (Quoted in Marion Kozak, 'How It All Began: A Footnote to History', in *Socialist Register*, Vol. 31 (London, 1995), p. 268.)
[179] Miliband, 'John Saville', pp. 26 – 27.
[180] MacIntyre, 'The 'New Left', p. 99.

Rejecting Miliband's suggestions that the New Left should seek to forge more formal alliances with groups such as the 'Victory for Socialism' movement, a 'Letter to Our Readers' declared: 'We don't think there is any one single organisational answer; and anyone who thinks that the 'new left' can or ought to be immediately identified with one body, such as 'Victory for Socialism', doesn't understand what is happening.'[181]

The *NLR* was officially launched on Monday 14 December 1959, at a packed meeting in St Pancras Town Hall.[182] Joining Hall, Thompson and Williams on the 'formidably intellectual platform', were the novelist Iris Murdoch, the philosopher A. J. Ayer, and the Fife miner turned politician, Lawrence Daly.[183] Williams would later recall how the agenda of the meeting seemed to revolve less around 'the matter of founding a review', than it did a general feeling 'that some new political direction was needed and that in such a review a new political direction was being found.'[184] Correspondingly, in his own comments from the platform, Williams had recapitulated the claim that 'the two major traditions of socialism' in Britain ('Stalinist' communism and Fabian 'social democracy') had now 'broken down' indefinitely, and that this 'imposed a new kind of challenge to socialist activists and thinkers...'[185] For Williams, the prospects for the journal itself rested almost entirely on the capacity of its distinctive constituent elements to further their mutual 'search for new common ground';[186] indeed, if new leftists were to do their 'job in the provision of the solid thinking which must succeed... [their] lively evocation of a mood, the general effect', Williams predicted, 'could be considerable'.[187] At the same time, however, Williams also recognised that the transition to this new phase of activity would inevitably raise a number of challenges and difficulties by which new leftists had hitherto been largely untroubled. Perhaps the chief danger was that 'the New Left, pleased by its first successes' would now 'sit back and become exactly like the 'Old Left', they had

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[181] Unsigned, 'Letter to Our Readers (I)', p. 138.
[182] One contemporary reported counted 'amongst... 700 or so present' at the launch , not all of them 'young.' (W. John Morgan, quoted in David Kynaston, *Modernity Britain: Book Two – A Shake of the Dice* (London, 2014), p. 55.
[183] MacEwen, *The Greening of a Red*, p. 205.
[184] Raymond Williams, 'You're a Marxist, Aren't You?', in Raymond Williams *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London, & New York, 1989), p. 67.
[185] Ibid.
[186] Williams, 'The New British Left', p. 345.
[187] Ibid., p. 347.

'sought to invigorate and clarify'.[188] Correspondingly, for Williams, 'the crucial test' that new leftists still had to pass was that posed by their Communist and Labour Movement critics: 'Can you create a contemporary and effective socialist theory… without in effect coming back to us?'[189]

The chief function of the *new* Left Clubs would be to act 'as open local forums of socialist theory, and as local points of social initiatives';[190] the principal hope being that, in time, the clubs would grow to become places 'beyond the reach of bureaucracy, where the initiative would remain in the hands of the rank and file'.[191] According to Nigel Young '[t]hose who associated with the partisan coffee house and N[ew] L[eft] clubs in their first days' managed to '[generate] a genuine *élan* and identity'[192] Correspondingly, Michael Rustin would later recall how, for him, the atmosphere at the London Club's meetings in the late 1950s seemed to simultaneously represent both 'a renaissance of the political tradition of the Popular Front… and the birth of a new generation of radical socialists brought together in lively and sometimes moving synthesis'.[193] For Trevor Griffiths, meanwhile, one of the chairs of the Manchester Left Club, it felt 'like the Left Bank in Paris… You were in your own city, but you were completely outside your own culture.'[194] Alternatively, John Charlton recalls how 'the Newcastle Left Club provided a forum for committed Marxists who did not have to defend Washington or Moscow and were strongly interested in the idea of workers' control.' Charlton describes how following its launch in late 1959 the Club met intermittently for two years and '[b]y Autumn 1961… contained the core of what was to become the International Socialists.'[195]

Augmenting the clubs, the publication of *Out of Apathy*, edited by Thompson, the first in what was intended as an ongoing series of 'New Left Books' in April 1960, suggested an attempt to project a less equivocal New Left language and strategy, as well as 'a new sense of immediacy… to place the transition to the new society at the

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[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid.', p. 347.
[190] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 109.
[191] Thompson, 'The New Left', p. 17.
[192] Young, *An Infantile Disorder?*, p. 145.
[193] Rustin, 'The New Left as a Social Movement', p. 121.
[194] Quoted in Stanton B. Garner Jr., *Trevor Griffiths: Politics, Drama, History* (Michigan 1999), p. 22.
[195] John Charlton, *Don't You Hear the H-Bombs Thunder? Youth & Politics on Tyneside in the Late 'Fifties and Early 'Sixties* (London, 2009),p. 19.

head of the agenda.'[196] As Norman Birnbaum introduced the book, whilst 'the discussion opened by the two journals since 1957 [had] evoked a considerable response', the ambition of New Left Books was to 'make a more considerable contribution to British socialism.'[197] Thus, whilst future editions, would continue to pursue such perennial preoccupations as 'the new élite… the educational system, and… the possibility of workers' control in industry', they would also seek to '[enlarge]… the scope of political discussion', in order to incorporate some of the less immediate… advertising, mass media, youth culture, and the 'angry' prerogatives of the emerging post-war generation.[198] Hall's 'The Supply of Demand', and Samuel's 'Bastard Capitalism', both offered pointed, criticism of the prevailing post-war economic 'consensus'. Elsewhere, Thompson's 'Revolution' (one of three contributions by Thompson) insisted that '*without* the displacement of the dynamic of the profit motive all other means will prove ineffectual'.[199] At the same time, however, 'Revolution' also reasserted the earlier new-left claim that no genuine 'Society of Equals' could ever be 'made' without also initiating 'a revolution in moral attitudes, too far-reaching to be reduced by any National Executive to a 'formula'.'[200] Indeed, the kind of revolutionary transition anticipated by *new* leftists, Thompson suggested, could never 'be defined in narrow political (least of all parliamentary) terms'; neither could they 'be certain in advance, in what context the breakthrough' would first be made. Rather it was beholden on new leftists to '*find out* the breaking point, not by theoretical speculation alone, but *in practice* by unrelenting reforming pressures in many fields, which are designed to reach a revolutionary culmination.'

The concluding paragraphs of 'Revolution', in particular, emphasising the 'unique' potency of the 'British revolutionary tradition' at the beginning of the 1960s – 'a tradition which could leaven the socialist world' – are, arguably, amongst the most analytically questionable of Thompson's entire career. It is important, however, to distinguish, at this stage, Thompson the historian or political theorist, from Thompson the New Left *propagandist*. As he would later concede himself, in the attempt to forge the New Left into a meaningful popular movement between 1959 and 1961,

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[196] Thompson, 'Revolution', p. 306.
[197] Birnbaum, 'Foreword', in Thompson (ed.), *Out of Apathy*, p. *ix*.
[198] Ibid., pp. *x – xi*.
[199] Thompson, 'Revolution', p. 289.
[200] Ibid., pp. 189 – 190.

'one's responsibilities as an intellectual workman became forgotten in one's task as an impresario.'[201]

For Thompson one of the first strategic priorities was to find some tangible moral or political cause, through which the necessarily abstract' new-left appeal might be made flesh – much as the fight against fascism in the 1930s and 1940s had vivified Marxism for an earlier generation of activists. Such a cause, Thompson believed, could be found in the burgeoning campaign against nuclear weapons.

CND

From early on nuclear threat had been identified as an essential element within the burgeoning new-left agenda. As the *ULR* put it in 1959: 'If any event has transformed the course, tempo, and tone of politics since the crucial dates of Suez and Hungary, it is the formation of CND, and the development of a body of people drawn into politics (many for the first time) around the fight against nuclear stupidity.'[202] As early as 1958, Hall had issued a pamphlet, *Breakthrough*, arguing that if Britain were to take the precedent in embarking on an ambiguous unilateralist policy, it would be less likely to lead to the nation's expulsion from NATO, as it would provide a model by which the other allied powers might follow suit. For Thompson, meanwhile, 'the Bomb' was analogous to 'man's own predicament', bearing as it did within it both 'death and life, total destruction of human mastery over History.'[203] If nothing else, he suggested, the nuclear threat had served to put clear *choices* back on the political agenda, bringing 'the region of conscious human agency [into] the making of history.'[204] 'The Bomb' stood as 'an expression of own human nature: it is our apathy which hangs above us. For the history of political power and the history of human nature have always been interdependent.'[205]

In this context, the burgeoning Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) was immediately recognised by most new leftists as a supreme example of mankind's

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[201] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 101.
[202] Unsigned, 'ULR to New Left Review', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 7 (Autumn, 1959), p. 2.
[203] Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism', p. 143.
[204] Thompson, 'Agency and Choice', p. 91.
[205] Thompson, 'Outside the Whale', p. 187.

collective potential to refuse fatalism, by opposing a 'moral imperative… [against] all the life-corrupting arguments of expediency.'[206] Beginning in April 1958, the movement's annual marches to the government's nuclear research station at Aldermaston garnered considerable public attention and support, which only continued to grow (if with diminishing returns) well into the 1960s.[207] Beyond this, however, the marches, also played a seminal role in bringing together groups and individuals whose opposition to nuclear weapons, though deeply felt, was really just one manifestation of a much wider sense of social and political disaffection. For young people in particular, the experience of participating in the peace movement was conceivably to be the catalyst for a kind of *personal* political awakening that would continue long after the Campaign itself had lost its initial momentum.[208]Thus the poet Christopher Logue would later identify the annual marches to Aldermaston as 'the beginning of free association between people';[209] Peter Roberts recounts how the first march exposed 'outsiders' like him to the exhilarating '[realisation] that, contrary to our headmasters' propaganda, we weren't the only freak around, there were actually thousands of us.'[210] Similarly, recalling his experience of the second Aldermaston march in 1959, Mike Down suggests how for young people like him the campaign against nuclear weapons helped to foster a recognition of the need for a new kind of social and political order: 'Beforehand we went to the Partisan, the left-wing coffee shop run by *Universities and Left Review*… We believed nuclear war to be a real and present threat to mankind and were protesting not just against the bomb but against the core values of the society which sanctioned it.'[211]

It is important, however, not to lose sight of the fundamentally universal – cross-generational, cross-Party, pan-faith – appeal and character of CND in the late 1950s. As it was, new leftists – rather like their notorious communist counterparts in the

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[206] Thompson, 'Agency and Choice', p. 90.

[207] In 1959, for example, an estimated 20,000 to 25,000 had taken part in the march's second leg, between Aldermaston and London: By 1960, estimates of those at the march's destination in Trafalgar Square were as high as 100,000. (Figures quoted in Holger Nehring, 'The British and West German Protests against Nuclear Weapons and the Cultures of the Cold War, 1957 – 64', in *Contemporary British History*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (2005), pp. 224 – 225.)

[208] As Stuart Hall would later observe, by the end of the 1960s, the famous CND logo had become 'a symbol for every kind of outsider or political opponent.' (Quoted in Ronald Fraser (ed.), *1968: A Student Generation in Revolt* (London, 1988) p. 35.)

[209] Quoted in Green, *Days in the Life*, pp. 6.

[210] Ibid., pp. 6 – 7.

[211] Quoted in Charlton, *Don't You Hear the H-Bomb's Thunder?*, p. 9.

movement – occasionally drew hostility for appearing to seek to 'politicise' an issue that, to many campaigners, by its very nature, had to be approached beyond traditional sectarian politics.[212] John Creasby recalls 'a mass of people, a huge carnival: political parties and local councils, students, mixed with those from different religious cultures, entertainers… Impromptu jazz bands blasting forth, groups of guitar players signing folk songs and anti-war songs and everywhere banners, posters, the black and white CND symbol, TV, radio and press reporters closely watching for the outlandish or cranky marcher and ignoring the huge mass.'[213]

There is a strong case for seeing the vote in favour of unilateral disarmament at the 1960 Labour Conference in Scarborough as the early New Left's most tangible political success; as Keith Hindell and Philip Williams concluded their analysis: '[the New Left's] voice was loud, and it was listened to.' [214] A *NLR* editorial at the end of 1960 declared '[t]he Scarborough venture' as 'an unqualified success, and the New Left's most effective intervention in the current ding-dong to date.' [215] Williams would later recall how '[p]eople were already guessing the dates for the disappearance of the Labour Party'.[216]

As such, the reversal of the vote on nuclear disarmament in the 1961 conference came as an 'astonishing blow.'[217] The front cover of the spring edition of *NLR* suggested that 'perhaps the only lesson to be learned from four years of campaigning for nuclear disarmament is that there is no simple way in which a political campaign can calculate its effect upon people and Governments'.[218] As Hall later recalled the prevailing feeling:

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[212] See, for example, Christopher Driver, 'New Left and Old Demonstrators' in *The Guardian* (14 February 1963), p. 8; and Nicholas Walter, 'Letter', in *The Spectator* (19 October 1962), p. 15.

[213] Quoted in Charlton, *Don't You Hear the H-Bomb's Thunder?*, pp. 71 – 72.

[214] See Keith Hindell & Philip Williams, 'An Analysis of Some Votes at the Labour Party Conference of 1960 and 1961', in *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (July 1962) pp. 306 – 320; and Rustin, 'The New Left as a Social Movement', p. 128. Among the innovative New Left's agitational 'strategies' employed at Scarborough was the publishing and circulation of a daily newssheet amongst Party delegates, satirizing the previous day's developments and emphasising how the nuclear issue trumped every other issue on the Platform. A *NLR* 'Letter to Readers' also alluded to the Left Clubs Committee's production of 'a special brochure, describing the work and aims of the Left Clubs and *NLR*, which will be given away to delegates to help spread the word.' (Unsigned, 'Letter to Readers', in *New Left Review*, No. 5 (September-October 1960), p. 72.)

[215] Unsigned, 'Letter to Readers' in *New Left Review*, No. 6 (November – December 1960), p. 71.

[216] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London, 1979). p. 365.

[217] Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London 1979), p. 362.

[218] Unsigned, 'Editorial on CND', in *New Left Review*, No. 8 (March-April 1961), cover page.

> We were faced with the stark fact that we could easily be blown up by the escalatory moves of the United States and the Soviet Union… It didn't matter if you had a mass movement or the votes – the whole thing could be decided in five minutes by whoever picked up the red phone and said, 'We're going to bomb you out of the skies.' We felt neutralized, impotent. As a result, both CND and the New Left lost confidence in winning a strategic victory.[219]

In November 1962, Hall helped to penned 'a detailed, closely argued and revisionist statement of CND's policy'.[220] Whilst the ostensible aim of *Steps Towards Peace* was to offer a genuinely 'workable' alternative to prevailing nuclear thinking, one that at least acknowledged the so-called 'pragmatism' of Cold War ideologues, the effect on the anti-nuclear movement itself were, as Hall himself later acknowledged, 'psychologically… disastrous'.[221] Indeed, 'to many of the rank and file', far from offering a bold new direction, *Steps Towards Peace* looked like straightforward 'back-pedalling.'[222]

The strategic and organisational challenges encountered by CND in the early 1960s, can, in many ways be thought analogous to those confronted by the New Left itself. Indeed, as Taylor and Pritchard would later note, to some extent 'the fate of the two movements were inextricably connected and arguably neither could have survived, let alone succeeded, without the other.'[223] As numerous critics of the early New Left have subsequently suggested, much of the problem stemmed from the essentially

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[219] Hall, quoted in Fraser, *1968*, p. 36.

[220] Richard Taylor & Colin Pritchard, *The Protest Makers: The British Nuclear Disarmament Movement of 1958 – 1965 Twenty Years On* (Oxford 1980), p. 12.

[221] As Hall commented at the time, '[t]he danger is that, while we stand on the sidelines waving our slogans hopefully, with the best will in the world, the nuclear parade is passing us by.' (Stuart Hall, 'The Cuban Crisis: Trial-Run or Steps Towards Peace?', in *War & Peace: The CND Quarterly*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (January-March 1963), p. 16.) For Hall's subsequent reflections on the effects of *Steps Towards Peace*, see Taylor et al, *The Protest Makers*, p. 12. See also Sedgwick's summary in 'The Two New Lefts': 'Stuart Hall co-authored the CND Executive's 'intermediate' policy statement of 1962, of which Canon Collins could later confess, in the mood of retrospect occasioned by his resignation from the chairmanship: '... we must never seem to be departing from our basic policy. It was, perhaps, our failure in this respect which led to the poor reception by the bulk of the Campaign of the 'Steps Towards Peace' programme.'' (Sedgwick, 'The Two New Lefts', p. 40.)

[222] Rip Bulkeley, Pete Goodwin, Ian Birchall, Peter Binns & Colin Sparks, ''If at First You Don't Succeed…' Fighting Against the Bomb in the 1950s and 1960s', in *International Socialism*, Vol. 2, No. 11 (Winter 1981), p. 23.

[223] Taylor et al, *The Protest Makers*, p. 64.

ambiguous identity of the two movements: Were they moral movements, or political ones?

Conclusion

In September 1962 *The Spectator* carried what its author, Stephen Fay described as a 'barely premature' four-page obituary of the New Left: 'The New Left', Fay observed, 'is exhausted. It barely exists in capital letters any longer… All that exists now is another socialist sect. The sect is wholly without political influence.'[224] Nor, Fay continued, was there 'much enthusiasm among intellectuals, or others, of our time for the major enthusiasms of the New Left… They have failed. Their magazine is in decline. After fifteen issues, it is smaller, more academic, and financially shaky. The clubs exist in little more than name…'[225] Fay further disclosed how any conceivable new-left influence on the Labour Party's recent home policy document, *Signposts for the Sixties*, had been 'rigorously censored' by Transport House; indeed, according to Fay, 'the frustrations of being on the New Left [had already] forced some of its members, including Hall, into the Independent Nuclear Disarmament Election Campaign'.[226] Others meanwhile, he claimed, had been 'quietly compromised', realising that with no way to 'beat the party bureaucracy' they may as well join it.

In her 1996 autobiography, *Walking in the Shade,* Doris Lessing suggests that, 'in retrospect it easy to see [that the New Left] was not a new beginning, as we all thought then, but only one of the death throes of the Communist Party': 'What' she asked, 'did all those yards, those acres, of analysis and disputation actually do? Or change? Did they affect British socialism? Make a new Britain? Become part of the policies of political parties? It is taken for granted that when there is a 'new' wave, then it must have its journal, and the new young ones chop logic and write think pieces, but mostly it all goes on in a vacuum.' [227]

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[224] Stephen Fay, 'The Late New Left', in *Spectator* (21 September 1962), p. 390.

[225] Ibid.

[226] Ibid. The Independent Nuclear Disarmament Election Committee (INDEC), formed in April 1962 by a number of disaffected CNDers, including Pat Arrowsmith and Vanessa Redgrave. Campaigned in the 1964 General Election in Bromley and Twickenham.

[227] Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography, 1949 – 1962* (London 1997), p. 190.

Nevertheless, a 1960, 'Letter to Readers' in *NLR* 4, observed how 'the idea and approach of the New Left' had now 'taken root very widely in the country.' Correspondingly, a discussion between British Party Communists at the beginning of the 1960s revolved around the question of 'how it was that the [New Left's] revisionist concepts had made such deep inroads into so many of us, including those who remained loyal to the Party.'[228] Indeed, by this stage, it was noted, it was 'much easier for a young intellectual to become a New Lefter than a Communist.' Such an achievement, after a little less than four years of new-left political and cultural activity can be considered as far from negligible. Indeed, speaking in 1977, Williams stated that, '[in his view] the biggest mistake' made by the early New Left's 'leadership' 'was not the overestimate of the possibilities of an alternative movement from '58 to '61, but the resigned re-acceptance of conventional politics which followed from '62 to '64 – with the illusions of the Labour Party which went along with it'[229]

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[228] Ralph Russell, 'Discussion Contribution: On How New is the 'New Left', in Marxism Today, Vol. 5, No. 1. (January, 1961), p. 29

[229] Williams, *Politics and Letters*, pp. 366 – 367.

Chapter Two

Sound and Fury? New Leftism and the British 'Cultural Revolt' of the 1950s

> Today increasing numbers of young intellectuals feel themselves to be rebels against 'the Establishment': the slavery of the human soul to material trivia, the hypocrisy and tedium of political life, the debasement of standards by monstrous, sprawling, impersonal money-making media, the acceptance of mass-slaughter which retches in the speeches of 'statesmen' and which help to underpin our economy, the futile extinction of generous or dignified aspirations in the morass of expediencies, competing self-interests, bureaucratic power-blocks. But since they can see no social force capable of making headway against this flux, their 'revolt' consists in imagining themselves to be 'outside' this thing, posturing and grimacing through the window. In fact, they are outside nothing but the *humanist tradition*.

> E.P. Thompson, 'Socialism and the Intellectuals', in *Universities and Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1957), p. 34.

> Where *are* we going? How long will it take us? How many will fall by the wayside? ...Those who responded to 1956 understood that what had happened was a social experience. They knew that the fruit of the period lay in the gradual unfolding of new opportunities and possibilities – in politics, art, communication and living – which many young people had never glimpsed before in the post-war years. They recognised… 'being alive', and turned to it with an act of unashamed reverence.

> Stuart Hall, 'Something to Live For', in *Encore*, No. 21, (September – October 1959), reprinted in Charles Marowitz, Tom Milne & Owen Hale, *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama* (London, 1965), pp. 110 – 111.

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.

> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V (1606).

If one of the principal aims of the early New Left was to provoke, or perhaps *reawaken*, a popular radical consciousness within what was perceived to be the increasingly contracted and moribund political and cultural climate of 1950s' Britain, then its founders might have been forgiven for assuming that the *emotional* preconditions for such an awakening had already been registered (at least amongst

young people), even before the decisive mobilising 'conjuncture' of 1956 finally struck. As discussed in the previous chapter, historiographical emphasis on '1956' as the key fault line marking the emergence of not only a *new* British left, but also, a discernibly more assertive, acerbic and *affluent* 'post-war generation', can obscure the considerable degree of continuity and dialogue some new leftists sought to maintain with what they identified as a native lineage, or 'tradition', of popular radical struggle.[1] At the same time, the equally familiar representation of the 1950s in general as a period of enduring sociopolitical consensus and conformity tends to mask the deep sense of frustration and resentment many individuals clearly harboured towards the decade's prevailing political and cultural orthodoxies. Such sentiments had arguably only intensified following the Labour Party's loss at the 1951 General Election – an event interpreted by at least one young observer as the final betrayal of 'the great liberating wave of social justice that my generation expected to result from the 1945 Labour victory.'[2] As it was, by the mid-1950s, feelings of hostility towards Britain's perceived social and cultural stasis had been identified as providing the impetus for a distinctive new creative sensibility or 'movement', one further characterised by its irreverence, its vindication of 'authentic' subjective experience, but, perhaps above all – at least according to a number of leading Fleet Street commentators – its impulsive and unalloyed *anger*.

Initially associated with a relatively small number of novelists, poets and playwrights, though, latterly extended to incorporate actors, artists, critics, filmmakers, television producers and even, 'pop' singers, the emergence of the so-called 'Angry Young Man' (AYM) phenomenon in the second half of the 1950s would quickly come to serve as one of the defining motifs of impending sociocultural change in post-war Britain.[3] Indeed, though, from the start, even those who had been advanced (or who

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[1] What E. P. Thompson invoked as 'the long and tenacious revolutionary tradition of the British commoner.' (Thompson, 'Revolution', p. 308.)

[2] John Wain, *Sprightly Running: Part of an Autobiography* (London 1962), p. 180. This despite, for the third time since the war, the Labour Party returning the highest number of votes – 13, 948, 605 compared to the Winston Churchill-led Conservative Party's, 13, 717, 538.

[3] As A. E. Dyson later recalled: 'By 1958, an angry young man was anyone from a teddy-boy to a young don at Redbrick, from a teenaged pop singer having his fifth breakdown to Lord Altrincham…' (A. E. Dyson, 'General Editor's Preface', in John Russell Taylor, *Look Back in Anger: A Selection of Critical Essays* (London 1968), p. 22) A complete list of figures considered worthy of 'angry' status is beyond the scope of this project; however, to give some sense of the cultural reach of the 'angry' appellation from the late 1950s onwards, and also to clarify the range of individuals my use of the acronym 'AYM' is intended to represent here, the following roll-call might be useful: (Novelists)

had advanced themselves) as the 'angries'' *de facto* 'leaders' had dismissed the classification as little more than 'a cheap, journalistic fiction', between roughly 1957 and 1962 virtually no new writer, filmmaker, actor or artist below the age of forty could expect to avoid having either himself or his work assimilated under the 'angry' rubric.[4] Generally construed as an instinctive emotional response to the decline of British imperial identity, 'the Bomb', and other attendant anxieties of contemporary life, (as well as, more prosaically, as a necessary correlative of the famous education and welfare reforms of the 1940s) 'anger' was significantly also widely conceived as synonymous with the same 're-structuring of British social life' that was concurrently yielding the British 'new left' itself.[5]

Concomitant with this perceived political dimension was a brief resurgence of interest in the debate over the extent to which writers, artists, and other intellectuals should (or should *not*) attempt to engage with the major political and social questions of their day.[6] Whilst in the 1930s, a brief show of allegiance from a number British writers and poets towards the anti-fascist overtures of the 'popular front', had appeared to

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Kingsley Amis, Stan Barstow, John Braine, William Camp, Nigel Dennis, J. P. Donleavy, Thomas Hinde, Barry Hines, B. S. Johnson, John Wain, Roger Longrigg, Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, Clancy Sigal, Alan Silitoe, Andrew Sinclair, David Storey, Peter Towry, Edmund Ward, Keith Waterhouse; (Dramatists and Playwrights) John Arden, Jim Allen, Brendan Behan, Shelagh Delaney, Tony Garnett, William Gaskill, Ann Jelicoe, Bernard Kops, John Osborne, Alun Owen, N. F. Simpson, Arnold Wesker, Charles Marowitz, Michael Hastings, David Mercer, Harold Pinter, Dennis Potter; (Poets) Michael Horowitz, Philip Larkin, Robert Conquest, Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, Christopher Logue, Adrian Mitchell; (Journalists and Critics) Penelope Gilliatt, Martin Green, Anthony Hartley, Ian Nairn, George Scott, Kenneth Tynan ('Philosophers') Bill Hopkins, Stuart Holroyd, Colin Wilson; (Filmmakers) John Schlesinger, Lindsay Anderson, Ken Loach, Karel Reisz, Ken Russell, Tony Richardson; (Actors) Alan Bates, Richard Burton, Tom Courtenay, Albert Finney, Kenneth Haigh, Richard Harris; (Musicians and Singers) Billy Fury, Adam Faith, John Lennon, Mick Jagger.

[4] John Osborne, *News Chronicle*, (February 27, 1957) Osborne continues: 'Fleet Street created the AYM… It didn't matter much whether they were Angry or even Young,.' (Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *The Angry Young Men: A Literary Comedy of the 1950s* (London, 2002), p. *xi*.)

[5] Rothman, 'British Labor's 'New Left'', p. 400. See also, Bernard Crick, 'Socialist Literature in the 1950's', *The Political Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (July-September 1960), p. 362; Anthony Hartley, 'The Intellectuals of England', in *The Spectator* (May 4th 1962), pp. 11 – 13; Kettle, 'How New is the 'New Left'?', p. 302; David Marquand, 'Lucky Jim and the Labour Party', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 1 (Spring 1957), pp 57 – 60; John Mander, *The Writer and Commitment* (London 1961), pp. 179 – 212.

[6] See, for example, Lindsay Anderson, 'Commitment in Cinema', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 1 (Spring 1957), pp. 44 – 48; John Lehmann et al, 'The Writer in His Age' in *The London Magazine*, Volume 4, No. 5 (May 1957); Michael Armstrong, 'Commitment in Criticism' in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 2 (Summer 1957), pp. 65 – 66; Maschler (ed.), *Declaration* (1957); Norman Mackenzie (ed.) *Conviction* (London 1958); Neal Wood, *Communism and British Intellectuals* (London 1959); E. P. Thompson, 'Commitment in Politics' in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 6 (Spring 1959), pp. 50 – 55; Thompson, 'Outside the Whale', pp. 141 – 194; Mander, *The Writer and Commitment*; Stephen Spender (ed.), *The Writer's Dilemma* (London 1961); W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London 1962); J. B. Priestley, *Literature and Western Man* (London 1962); Anthony Hartley, *A State of England* (London 1963).

signify the emergence of a more 'continental' style of intellectual 'commitment' in British public life, by the early 1950s, the predominant 'mode' of most British intellectuals appeared to have returned to one of pronounced political quietism. As *The Spectator* columnist Anthony Hartley saw it, 'most English intellectuals [aspired to be]… shy, proud, formidable men of easily demonstrable talent, great industry and independent means, living in the country (whether in castle or cottage) and descending into the world's arena only on occasions of almost religious solemnity.'[7] In contrast, the prototypical AYM was invariably characterised as an impudent and outspoken iconoclast – hostile, or, at least, indifferent, to virtually every preexisting notion of social decorum or deference; far from gravitating towards a life spent in isolated aesthetic contemplation, he was instead associated with 'provincial' urban and sub-urban environments – 'redbrick' universities, smoke-filled saloon bars, tenement flats, new-build housing estates – from which he might appear equally at ease expounding on subjects ranging from the moral case against nuclear weapons to the relative preferability of 'pretty girls with large breasts' over 'some fearful woman who's going to talk to you about Ezra Pound and hasn't got large breasts and probably doesn't wash much.'[8]

Whilst to leading representatives of Britain's cultural 'establishment' such unashamedly *anti*-intellectual posturing, and preoccupation with more manifestly worldly matters, seemed to reflect little more than 'a rebellion of the Lower Middle Brows', and a 'new wave of philistinism', to more sympathetic – invariably, though not exclusively, meaning *younger* – observers, the values and aspirations invoked by 'angry' literature, not to mention the growing media presence of AYM themselves, appeared to signify the beginnings of a fundamental shift in the hitherto elitist, class-bound and complacent character of British public discourse.[9] Writers such as

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[7] Hartley, *A State of England*, p. 27.

[8] Kingsley Amis quoted in Dale Salwak, *Interviews with Britain's Angry Young Men* (Milford 1984), p. 21. See also Iain Hamilton, 'Who's Angry, 1958' in *The Manchester Guardian* (May 30th, 1958), p. 8; Morton Kroll, 'The Politics of Britain's Angry Young Men' in *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (June 1959), pp. 555 – 557; Philip Toynbee, 'Writing to Some Purpose' in *The Observer* (11 June 1961), p. 26; Malcolm Bradbury, 'Disinterestedness or Commitment?', in *The Guardian* (16 June 1961), p. 6.

[9] Stephen Spender, 'On Literary Movements', in *Encounter*, No. 2 (November 1953), p. 66. In the same article, Spender went on to suggest that the new literature was 'easier to define… in negative than in positive terms… Its exponents often express contempt for intellectual standards which – to their minds – arise from or are associated with 'classy' ones. There is an aroma of inferiority complex about its protest.' (pp. 66 – 67).

Kingsley Amis, John Braine, John Osborne, Alan Sillitoe and Arnold Wesker, not only seemed to be unapologetic about their being identified with so-called 'lower-brow/lower-class' values and tastes but, in most cases, actively advanced them as a more 'vital' and 'authentic' expression of contemporary British experience. In doing so, they rapidly found themselves anointed – whether willingly or not – as principal spokesmen in what, by the end of the decade, some were identifying as an all-out British 'cultural revolt'.[10]

For those contemporaneously attempting to articulate a *new* leftist consciousness in British political and cultural life, the conspicuously more plebeian emphases of the 'angry' cultural shift, associated, as it was, with an atmosphere of incipient *generational* breakout, seemed an opportunity too good to miss; indeed, despite notable reservations, not least, from the characteristically querulous E. P. Thompson, about the degree of actual *political* focus, or 'commitment', demonstrated by the emerging post-war generation, most new leftists generally seemed only too willing to believe that the dissentient attitudes and aspirations to which young people appeared to gravitate, could, and indeed *must*, somehow be directed towards the New Left's own wider political and cultural agenda:[11] not only, did 'angry' culture's privileging of 'authentic', 'provincial' working-class voices and experiences seem to vindicate Richard Hoggart's and Raymond Williams's distinctive calls for a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of British national 'cultural politics', but, it was also excitedly noted, in many cases those voices already appeared to be speaking the *same* 'language of shared misfortune and revolt' advanced by the New Left itself. As Stuart Hall observed in 1959, 'in a sense… [the frustrations of Britain's post-war youth] are the frustrations of us all. They are only less 'mature', less polite, less conformist and restrained in giving vent to their feelings than we are. Our experiences are the same.

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[10] See, for example, Kenneth Allsop, *The Angry Decade: A Survey of the Cultural Revolt of the 1950s* (London 1958). Elsewhere, Clancy Sigal referred to 'that flanking attack on 'cultural orthodoxy' which we have come to associate with the Royal Court Theatre, 'Declaration,' *Universities and Left Review* and Aldermaston…' (Clancy Sigal, 'Free Cinema's Swan Song', in *The Guardian* (March 15th 1959), p. 19.)

[11] For more on Thompson's ambivalent take on the moral and political characteristics of what he variously refers to as the 'post-war', 'Aldermaston' or 'nuclear' generation, see his essays: 'Socialism and the Intellectuals', pp. 31 – 36; 'Commitment in Politics' pp. 50 – 55; and 'Outside the Whale', pp. 141 – 194.

One can find a counterpart… in the verbal violence of any novel of the Angry Young generation.'[12]

In his leading editorial position at the *ULR* (and, later, at the *NLR*) Hall, particularly, sought to forge alliances between the burgeoning New Left and what he took to be concurrent sympathetic developments in 'youth' culture and the 'popular arts'– not least, the novels and plays of the AYM, the dramatists, actors and directors associated with the English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre, and the 'auteur' filmmakers who came to prominence through the so-called 'Free Cinema' movement and, later, the 'New Wave'. As he would reflect in 1961: 'Such work dealt directly with problems and complexes of feeling which were close to us. They spoke with immediacy to our condition. They were cast in terms which we could clearly understand and sympathise with, by writers and directors whose 'commitments' we shared.'[13] Indeed, even if, as Harry Richie suggests, Hall merely recognised that 'AYM could command headlines and column space where writers associated with the New Left could not', there can be little disagreement with Richie's assessment that for a period in the late 1950s and early 1960s Hall and other new leftists 'tried to lionise Braine, Amis and Osborne as fellow radicals…' in the struggle to generate a new kind of (*leftist*) political consciousness in British cultural life.[14]

At the far end of this struggle lay a potent vision of a boldly progressive, inclusive, and, at last, genuinely *democratic* national 'common culture', one capable of both assimilating and communicating the full scope and diversity of contemporary British experience – or, at the very least, a far fuller conception than that offered by hitherto

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[12] Stuart Hall, 'Politics of Adolescence?', in *Universities & Left Review*, No. 6 (Spring 1959), p. 2. Elsewhere Hall identified, 'the rage and frustration of young intellectuals today… [as] symptomatic of attitudes prevalent among the less articulate' (Hall, 'In the No Man's Land', p. 86) For other representative *ULR* takes on the emerging post-war generation, see Derek Allcorn, 'The Unnoticed Generation', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 4 (Summer 1958), pp. 54 – 58; Stuart Hall, 'Absolute Beginnings: Reflections on the Secondary Modern Generation', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 7 (Autumn 1959), pp. 16 – 25; and Michael Kullman, 'The Anti-Culture Born of Despair', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 4 (Summer 1958), pp. 51 – 54.

[13] Stuart Hall, 'Commitment Dilemma', in *New Left Review*, No. 10 (July-August 1961), p. 67.

[14] Harry Richie, *Success Stories: Literature and the Media in England, 1950 – 1959* (London 1988), p. 205; p. 192. Other representative examples of this effort can be seen in Gabriel Pearson's acknowledgement that John Braine's *Room at the Top* constituted an 'an exploration of the dilemmas of our age in contemporary terms' (Gabriel Pearson, 'Reviews' in *Universities and Left Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer 1957); and in Michael Kaye's assertion that Arnold Wesker's 1960 play '*Roots* tells us the truth about ourselves in the New Left' (Michael Kaye, 'The New Drama', in *New Left Review*, No. 5 (September-October 1960), p. 65.

dominant social and cultural forms. Greatly buoyed by, on one hand, Williams' radical explication of 'culture', not simply as a fixed 'body of intellectual and imaginative work', but as a teleological 'process', through which a given society might (or might not) move towards 'a total qualitative assessment' of itself; and on the other, by Hoggart's assertion that the values, aspirations and ideals engendered in 'traditional' working-class cultural practices could be favourably integrated with those of so-called 'elite' or 'high' culture, new leftists began to position themselves as principal interlocutors in a growing national discussion directed towards advancing the 'real' meaning and value of Britain's national cultural identity as it moved towards the threshold of the 1960s.[15]

As it was, by beginning of the 1960s, the New Left's contribution to this discussion could be shown to have yielded, amongst other things, the foundations of a distinct and vibrant new-leftist subculture of its own standing, one incorporating political and cultural journals, novels, plays, films, radio and television productions, jazz and folk music revues, 'anti-Ugly' campaigns, and numerous other burgeoning social and cultural initiatives. As the 'Free Cinema' filmmaker Lindsay Anderson would later recall, 'it suddenly seemed as if there could really be a 'Popular Front' of political and creative principle; and in that popular front, movies and theatre could have a place and enjoy sympathetic support. For just a short time that is what actually happened.'[16] Correspondingly, in the same period, the New Left's leading 'cultural theorists' briefly found themselves being discussed as spearheading the creation of nothing less than a '*new* Establishment' – 'one willed by the people upon itself': 'It is figures like these', predicted the *Spectator* columnist B. A. Young, in April 1962, 'who will come crowding on to the scene, symbolically wheeling bicycles and wearing open-neck shirts in order to conform to the pattern of [the 'New Establishment'] when Mr. Connolly and Mr. Mortimer and Sir Harold [Acton] have gone from us.'[17] Elsewhere, the sociologist Richard Wollheim observed that books like Williams's *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961), and Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*

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[15] See Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 295, and Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*. See also Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams, 'Working Class Attitudes' in *New Left Review* No. 1 (January-February 1960), pp. 26 – 30. The final chapter of Williams' *The Long Revolution* (1961), 'Britain in the 1960s' makes explicit the…

[16] Quoted in Archer et al, *Out of Apathy*, p. 140.

[17] B. A. Young, 'Towards a New Establishment', in *The Spectator* (20 April 1962), p. 505.

(1957) – the '[s]eminal works in the diffusion of this new approach' – had 'already become *the* new 'tradition' of the Left.'[18]

For new leftists themselves, however, the relative optimism of these years was to be short-lived: in their attempt to harness the potent, if mercurial, energies of the emerging post-war generation, new leftists had frequently been obliged to oppose what they claimed were 'richer', more 'authentic' and more spiritually 'vital' modes of human activity against the 'crass', 'synthetic' and 'normalising' imperatives of mass commercial culture. Behind much of this rhetoric lay an implicit, if largely unexamined, assumption that by extending access to Britain's communications media, or, in Williams' term, 'clearing the channels' so as to facilitate the expression of *new*, or hitherto repressed forms of human experience and consciousness, young people would soon come to a realisation of their own 'innate' and 'natural' propensities for altruistic feeling. Conceivably, by the late 1950s, to many young people, the principle of political 'commitment' seemed an increasingly abstract and alienating concept. It seemed to require the suppression or sublimation of instincts, feelings and emotions that are deemed to run counter to the cause. As John Caughie has observed: 'the New Left was somewhat outflanked by the culture that was being embraced so enthusiastically by teenagers… where youth found new forms of excitement much of the Left found new forms of exploitation and cultural impoverishment.'[19] At the same time, the difficulty in permeating what Thompson would later characterise as 'a hostile national culture both smug and resistant to intellectuality and failing in self-confidence' would raise further questions about the efficacy of 'cultural struggle', as a primary vehicle of social and political transformation.[20]

British New Leftism's 'Moment of Culture'?

In 1979 a suggestion by the BCCCS historian, Richard Johnson, that 'the period from the mid-1950s to the early 1960s' be conceived as the British New Left's 'Moment of

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[18] Richard Wollheim, *Socialism and Culture*, Fabian Tract No. 331 (London 1962), pp. 3 – 4. [Emphasis added]. Williams would later complain that, for a period, '[Hoggart and Williams] got to be used like the name of a joint firm.' (Williams, 'The New British Left', p. 345).
[19] Caughie, *Television Drama*, p. 69.
[20] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p.17.

Culture' elicited a characteristically fierce rebuke from E. P. Thompson:[21] lambasting what he saw as Johnson's 'sloppy and impressionistic history', and wholly 'invented category, 'culturalism'', Thompson recapitulated the New Left's contextual origins amidst the 'political and theoretical' fallout of '1956', the diverse, and often antagonistic, moral and intellectual agendas of its founding intellectual milieu, and (if primarily through the auspices of 'the *Reasoner* group') its conscious identification with an indigenous, if, at that moment, profoundly compromised, 'Marxist tradition of historiography'.[22] Taking particular exception to Johnson's characterisation of his own political and historical work in this period as representative of a supposedly integral new-left approach to 'cultural questions', Thompson pointed out that much of his work in this time, including *The Making*, had, in fact, been 'written during a moment of polemic *against*… culturalism'.[23]

Nevertheless, from early on, it was the New Left's preoccupation with so-called 'cultural questions' that was seen to be its defining *leitmotif*. Thus, writing in 1960, the literary critic of *Marxism Today*, Arnold Kettle, claimed that the 'most noticeable feature' of the emerging new left sensibility was that its 'manifestation… [took] a 'cultural' rather than a political form.'[24] Indeed, in Kettle's view, *new* leftism could be most readily distinguished by its 'strongly anti-political, and especially anti-political party flavour'.[25] Correspondingly, for Kettle, the prototypical *new* leftist was someone 'more likely to be keen on Colin MacInnes and Arnold Wesker than about any directly political work'; the 'coffee bars… tended to become before the political activity'.[26]

More recently, scholars such as Nick Bentley, Susan Brook, and Paul Gilroy have sought to emphasise what they present as some of the 'unconscious', even reactionary

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[21] Johnson's suggestion was made in his original 'position paper' submitted before the notorious Ruskin History Workshop 13, in December 1979 (see Chapter Five), though built on themes he had expressed in his earlier article 'Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and Socialist-Humanism', in *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn 1978), pp. 79 – 100. See also Richard Johnson, 'Barrington Moore, Perry Anderson and English Social Development', in Hall et al, *Culture, Media, Language*, pp. 36 – 59.
[22] E. P. Thompson, 'The Politics of Theory', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London 1981), p. 397.
[23] Ibid., p. 399.
[24] Kettle, 'How New is the 'New Left'?', p. 302.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

elements within early New-Left cultural criticism. Thus Gilroy finds that a widespread anxiety about the decline of white, working-class male identity in the 1950s also emerges as a hidden subtext of the three major works of the 'culturalist New Left': Hoggart's *Uses*, Williams' *Long Revolution*, and Thompson's *The Making*;[27] Bentley asserts that, 'the core work of the New Left on youth should be read as a series of texts that articulated contemporary anxieties about the nature of identity, in terms of class, gender and the nation';[28] whilst Susan Brook finds that 'New Left criticism is permeated by an image of the feeling male body as the symptom of cultural crisis and as its cure.'[29]

Principles behind New Leftism's Cultural Turn

As it is, the principles informing British new leftism's 'cultural turn' in the late 1950s should be seen as both progressive *and* defensive, involving assertive as well as rearguard actions: on one hand, lay the projection of a boldly progressive, and inclusive national 'common culture'; on the other, a palpable ache and nostalgia, for a *prelapsarian* moment in British social development, *before* the onset of industrial modernity, and the crass and rapacious commercial culture that was now emerging as its latest hideous mutation. Correspondingly, at the same time as new leftists recognised, and sought to exploit, some of the 'new opportunities and possibilities – in politics, art, communication and living' that post-war economic 'affluence' and technological advances were helping to bring about, they also pointed to what they perceived as an 'indefinable sense of loss' associated with contemporary Western modes of living: 'a sense that life… has become impoverished, that men are somehow

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[27] 'The diseased organs of a vanishing working-class culture', Gilroy suggests, were 'anatomized' by these new leftists 'in a sympathetic conservationist spirit', a 'mournful operation' which, itself 'captured the pathological character' of contemporary social and cultural discourse. Such sentiments, Gilroy adds, would also later inform a good deal of the early output of the BCCCS, under the distinctly 'conservative' directorship of Richard Hoggart. (Paul Gilroy, 'British Cultural Studies and the Pitfalls of Identity', in Houston A. Baker Jr., Manthia Diawara & Ruth H. Lindeborg (eds.), *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (London 1996), p. 235.)

[28] Indeed, for Bentley, most of the New Left's cultural preoccupations merely mirrored 'recurrent anxieties and concerns in the 1950s culture and society generally: consumerism, Americanization, classlessness, the 'affluent society' – all of which appeared to be partly responsible for disaffected and delinquent teenagers bent on undirected violence and uncontrolled sexuality.' (Nick Bentley, 'The Young Ones: A Reassessment of the British New Left's Representation of 1950s Youth Subcultures', in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 65 (Summer 2005) p. 67.)

[29] Brook, *The Feeling Male Body*, p. 15.

'deracinate and disinherited,' that society and human nature alike have been atomized, and hence mutilated, above all that men have been separated from whatever might give meaning to their work and their lives.'[30]

The latter trend 'connected with a way of writing powerful in a primarily literary tradition of social commentary in England from Coleridge and Wordsworth on'.[31] At the centre of this literary tradition was an emphasis on '[o]bserved details and an open appeal to the reader's sympathies' in a way hardly known from European 'sociology''.[32] In *Culture and Society* (1958) Williams traced a rich native literary tradition of radical humanist writing, spanning from the Romantic writers of the eighteenth century through to the likes of Lawrence and Orwell in the first half of the twentieth century. As Williams would later suggest, the book reflected amongst other things his desire to present a counter-narrative to the innately conservative idea of 'culture' as the preserve of a ruling elite; it was, he suggested, his attempt to find 'a way of centring a different kind of discussion both in social-political and in literary analysis.'[33] It is, of course, at least partly within this context that we can also situate Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class,* as well as, certain chapters of Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy.* Thus as Thompson himself would later acknowledge, a major motivation behind his writing the book had been to evoke the moment *before* the onset of industrial modernity, in order to demonstrate 'the offence' that capitalism had inflicted on human consciousness:[34] in addition to consigning a considerable part of the population to debilitating and dehumanising working and living conditions,

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[30] Hall, 'Something to Live For', p. 111; Taylor, 'Alienation and Community', p. 11.

[31] Michael Green, 'Raymond Williams and Cultural Studies', in Ann Gray, Jan Campbell, Mark Erickson, Stuart Hanson and Helen Wood, *CCCS Selected Working Papers Volume I* (London & New York), p. 113.

[32] Ibid.

[33] In a cogent analysis of what they perceived as some of the representative lacunas within British new-left thought over three decades, Julia Swindells and Lisa Jardine suggest that, 'because *Culture and Society*… never explicitly makes clear the need for a historical underpinning to reading', a younger generation tended to cite Williams' work as having provided the justification for their taking Left criticism 'firmly in the direction of more sophisticated techniques of text analysis.' The unhappy result, they conclude, 'was a Left criticism which in the crucially formative early years', tended '[isolate] the text from history.' (Julia Swindells and Lisa Jardine, *What's Left? Women in Culture and the Labour Movement* (London 1990), pp. 112 – 113.)

[34] Quoted in *Talking History: C.L.R. James and E. P. Thompson*, documentary film (1983), available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MI7n7M6nAOA, accessed March 19th, 2013 at 2.20p.m.

capitalist industrialisation, Thompson argued, had effectively served to 'impose a disguise' across all human life.[35]

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine the New Left's 'cultural turn' as simply a leftist variation on an already embedded tradition of 'Romantic', or 'conservative', social and cultural criticism. Indeed, as Hall would later suggest, it was Hoggart and William's ''breaks' with the traditions of thinking in which they were situated… [that would, in time, prove] as important, if not more so, than their continuity with them'; at the same moment that new leftists were making their 'distinctive modern contribution' to this tradition, they were also effectively '[writing] its epitaph.'[36] In recent years, Francis Mulhern, has acknowledged how a later generation of new-left intellectuals, 'tended… to maximize the continuity between *Culture and Society* and the antecedent lineage of English cultural criticism and to minimize the continuity with a Marxism that Williams had first embraced, then seemingly abandoned, and was now rediscovering in new or unsuspected forms',[37] 'It is odd indeed', Mulhern observes, 'that the Englishness of *Culture and Society*, so often mistaken as the trace of Leavisian discourse, should turn out to be the sign of rather more substantial Communist affinities.'[38]

Perhaps foremost among these 'affinities' was an increasing awareness of the role that advertising and other forms of mass communications media were coming to play in both transcribing and regulating the popular values, aspirations and ideals within modern capitalist societies. Books such as Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) tapped into a vein of fear that advertising was increasing conformity, manipulation, deception and, ultimately, powerlessness. Similarly, *Scrutiny* regularly published diatribes against newspapers, advertising, and the cinema: writing in the

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[35] See particularly, 'The Curse of Adam' section of *The Making*, pp. 207 – 490; see also E. P. Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English', in *The Socialist Register*, Vol. 1 (London 1965), p. 356. In his review of Thompson's *The Making*, Williams observed that '[t]he most interesting general fact' to emerge from the book, as with the earlier *William Morris*, was 'that a socialist historian of the working-class movement sees the 'romantic' literary tradition as its main if often confused ally, and utilitarianism and paternalism as its principal and factual enemies. This decisive reorientation', Williams suggested, 'built on some nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century precedents' was synonymous with 'what has been seen, in recent years, as the New Left.' (Williams, 'Radical History', p. 985.)
[36] Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', in *Media, Culture and Society*, No. 2 (1980), pp. 57 – 58.
[37] Mulhern, 'Culture and Society', p. 31.
[38] Ibid., p. 36.

early 1930s Leavis had identified 'films, newspapers, publicity in all its forms, [and] commercially-catered fiction' as all being synonymous with 'satisfaction at the lowest level', offering as they did their 'consumers' little more than 'immediate pleasure, got with the least effort.'[39] Correspondingly, the poet and literary editor, Ian Hamilton, would later recall how, as a grammar school boy in the late 1950s, 'it was taken as axiomatic that all advertising was evil, all journalism a threat to the survival of the species, all pop music a sure way of catching something called 'sex in the head'… We read *Brave New World* so as to learn how things might work out if we did not read *Brave New World*.'[40]

According to Williams, as early as the 1920s, advertising had already 'passed the frontier of [merely] selling goods and services' in order to become 'involved with the teaching of social and personal values'; by the 1950s, it was 'also rapidly entering the world of politics'.[41] Meanwhile, Thompson lamented how '[i]n place of the great proletarian values revealed in class-solidarity and militancy, we now have, even among sections of our working-class movement, the values of private living growing up – the private fears and neuroses, the self-interest and timid individualism fostered by pulp magazines and Hollywood films.'[42]

Correspondingly, for most new leftists it was axiomatic that 'the extension of communications' be seen as 'inseparable from the extension of democracy and the whole process that we call the industrial revolution'[43]. As Thompson conceived it in 1959, 'the fight to control and break-up the mass media, and to preserve and extend the minority media' had become 'as central in political significance as... the fight against Taxes on Knowledge [had been] in the 1830s'; it represented nothing less than 'the latest phase of the long contest for democratic rights – struggle not only for the

[39] F. R. Leavis & Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment: The Training of Critical Awareness*, (London 1933), p. 3.
[40] Ian Hamilton, 'Evil Days', in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 14, No. 14 (July 23rd 1992), p. 9.
[41] Raymond Williams, 'The Magic System', in *New Left Review*, No. 4 (July-August 1960), p. 27.
[42] E. P. Thompson, 'William Morris and the Moral Issues Today', in *Arena*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (June-July, 1951), p. 26.
[43] Raymond Williams, *The Existing Alternatives in Communications*, Fabian Tract No. 337 (London 1962), p. 2.

right of the minority to be heard, but for the right of the majority *not* to be subject to massive influences of misinformation and human depreciation.'[44]

Elsewhere Hoggart famously invoked 'the shining barbarism' of 'mass' culture, associated with television, imported American culture, pop music, and pulp-fiction aimed at inciting the lowest common feelings, 'the ceaseless exploitation of a hollow brightness' and 'sex in shiny packets'.[45]

Their experiences as tutors in the Workers' Education Authority (WEA) in the 1940s and 1950s had helped to instil in figures like Hoggart, Thompson, and Williams a profound sense of the possibilities of cultural environment in which the principles of mutuality, respect and exchange were advanced not simply as by-products of the educational process, but as pedagogic principles in their own right.[46] Here was a model of experiential exchange, not as a 'top-down' imposition from paternalistic 'authority' to passive 'subordinate', but as a two-way-street – one on which the nominal 'expert' may be just as likely to be surprised out of his or her own epistemological convictions and assumptions as the so-called 'student'.[47]

Culture is ordinary

In contrast to the occasionally hysterical cultural jeremiads issued by some other commentators in this period, Williams posited the possibility of a more dialectical cultural process. As Kenny observes: 'Like Thompson, Williams believed that the

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[44] Thompson, 'The New Left', p.11 – 12.

[45] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London, 1957), p. 188.

[46] Hoggart worked in the Department of Adult Education at Hull University from 1946 to 1959; Thompson was an Extra-Mural teacher at Leeds University from 1948 to 1965; Williams was associated with the WEA in Oxford from 1946 to 1961. Tom Steele's valuable study tracing the pre-history and emergence of British Cultural Studies, quotes from a 1938 article, by the WEA tutor, Dryden Brook, detailing how the WEA saw its function as working towards 'the creation of a type of adult education and popular culture that will be a tool in the hands of the working class in forging a new social order.' (Quoted in Tom Steele, *The Emergence of Cultural Studies 1945 – 1965: Cultural Politics, Adult Education and the English Question* (London 1997), p. 88)

[47] See Williams, *Politics and Letters*, pp. 78 – 83. Correspondingly, Hall's first editorial for the *NLR* had identified '*education*' as the area in 'which the socialist movement lacks most of all': 'But education is too inactive and rigid a term – suggesting the stiff approach of teacher to pupil, the dull atmosphere of classroom and Party headquarters, where socialist ideas raise their ugly heads, are looked at distantly, and – for want of interest or vigour – fade and die away into the shadows again.' (Hall, 'Introducing NLR', p. 2)

renewal of socialism was dependent on a more complex and meaningful discourse of values and needs, yet his political vision involved the *transformation*, rather than the rejection of modernity.'[48] Thus while Williams conceded that the 'fact of cultural poverty' was by now virtually 'inescapable in contemporary Britain', to apportion blame for this solely on an inveterate 'mass-culture' was to ignore the possibilities and opportunities that modern communications media now afforded.[49] As it was, in Williams' view, 'certain ways of thinking, including some radical thinking about 'the masses',' needed to be understood as simply the symptom of 'the sickness of a particular society', that has become estranged from its own 'democratic institutions' and responsibilities. Even Hoggart, Williams suggested, in his lament for so-called 'traditional' working-class values and cultural practices, had 'taken over too many of the formulas, in his concentration on a different kind of evidence'; not least, he appeared to have 'picked up contemporary conservative ideas of the decay of politics in the working-class' – ideas for which Williams himself could find 'no evidence at all.'[50]

As Hall would later recall, '[Williams] assigned a fundamentally different theoretical content to the old terms, positing 'active and indissoluble relationships between elements or social practices normally separated out… 'Culture' is not *a* practice… It is threaded through *all* social practices, and is the sum of their interrelationship.'[51] Correspondingly, Williams questioned the assumption that 'the observable badness of so much widely distributed popular culture' could serve to act as any kind of 'true guide to the state of mind and feeling, the essential quality of living of its consumers'.[52] 'It is easy', he suggested in 1959, 'to assemble, from print and cinema and television, a terrifying and fantastic congress of cheap feelings and moronic arguments… [and] to go on from this and assume this deeply degrading version of the actual lives of our contemporaries. Yet do we find this confirmed when we meet people?'[53] 'We live in an expanding culture,' he observed elsewhere, 'yet we spend

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[48] Kenny, *The First New Left*, p. 96 [emphasis added].
[49] Williams, 'The New British Left', p. 345.
[50] Raymond Williams, 'Fiction and the Writing Public', in *Essays in Criticism*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Winter, 1957), p. 425.
[51] Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms', in *Media, Culture and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 57 (January, 1980), p. 59.
[52] Williams, *Culture and Society* , p. 12
[53] Raymond Williams, 'Working Class Culture', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 2 (Summer, 1957), p. 85.

much of our energy regretting the fact, rather than seeking to understand its nature and conditions.'[54] 'What kind of life can it be… to produce this extraordinary decision to call certain things culture and then separate them, as with a park wall, from ordinary people and ordinary work?'[55]

For Williams, 'mass communications' was simply 'the field in which our ideas of the world, of ourselves and of our possibilities, are most widely and often most powerfully formed and disseminated.'[56] '[A]ny real society', he suggested, 'any adequate community, is necessarily a totality. To belong to a community is to be part of a whole, and necessarily, to accept, while helping to define, its disciplines.'[57] The function of a healthy society's culture is to facilitate 'a full response of the human to a life continually unfolding in all its concrete richness and variety.'[58] As such Williams proposed the possibility of an endless process of cultural assimilation and expansion. This 'process', he acknowledged, would not be without its growing pains; 'radicals', 'progressives' and socialists, just as much as 'high-minded' conservative aesthetes, were likely to have their most cherished assumptions and ideas about what constitutes *meaningful* human activity, let alone great art and literature, deeply shaken. Indeed, as Williams himself admitted, he had been personally obliged 'to work through ten or fifteen years of familiar English thinking before I could really say that this enormous process, which has transformed and is transforming our society and our world, is a thing one *wants*.'[59] Nor did Williams appear to offer any guarantees that the process would automatically yield to a 'socialist' outcome: 'The word, culture, cannot automatically be pressed into service as any kind of social or personal directive', just as an '[a]rt that can be defined in advance is unlikely to be worth having'.[60] Indeed, Williams suggested, whilst, 'the idea of culture' could be accurately thought to reflect a 'common inquiry', 'our conclusions' were likely to be as 'diverse, as our starting points were diverse'.[61]

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[54] Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 12.
[55] Raymond Williams, 'Culture is Ordinary', in MacKenzie (ed.), *Conviction*, p. 77.
[56] Raymond Williams, *Communications* (London 1962), p. 16.
[57] Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 311.
[58] Williams, 'Working Class Culture', p. 30.
[59] Williams, *The Existing Alternatives in Communications*, p. 2.
[60] Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 295.
[61] Ibid., p. 285.

At this point, it is perhaps worth pausing for a moment in order to emphasise the profound egalitarian radicalism of Williams' and, by association, the early New Left's, democratizing cultural project. For well over a century, Western intellectuals had been preoccupied with the so-called 'masses' question. As the matter was succinctly put in 1930: 'There is one fact which, whether for good or ill, is of utmost importance in the public life of Europe at the present moment. This fact is the accession of the masses to complete social power.'[62] Even 'the advanced reformers' of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Thompson suggested, had found it easier 'to advocate the political programme of equality – manhood suffrage – than they did to shed the cultural attitudes of superiority.'[63] As Marshall Berman would later point out, for 'many twentieth century thinkers', the implications of 'mass' democracy were perhaps even more disturbing; 'the swarming masses' they encountered in 'the street and in the state… [had] no sensitivity, spirituality or dignity' – at least anything like their own; wasn't it 'absurd, then, that these 'mass men' (or 'hollow men') should have not only the right to govern themselves but also through their mass majorities the power to govern us?'[64] Correspondingly, the literary scholar John Carey has gone as far as to claimed that *the* central 'purpose' of the 'modernist' literature in the early part of the twentieth century 'was to exclude… newly educated (or 'semi-educated') readers' from the cultural debate and thus 'preserve the intellectual's seclusion from the 'mass'.'[65] As Williams himself later suggested: 'I knew perfectly well who I was writing against: Eliot, Leavis and the whole of the cultural conservatism that had formed around them – the people who had pre-empted the culture and literature of this country.'[66]

As such, a considerable part of *Culture and Society* was given over to Williams' efforts to demonstrate how otherwise deeply sympathetic and humanistic thinkers, from Burke and Coleridge, to Lawrence and Orwell, had been slowly compromised into reactionary or self-isolating positions – finding 'virtue', only in a 'kind of improvised living, and in an assertion of independence.'[67] For Williams, the belief

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[62] Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (New York & London 1932), p. 11.
[63] Thompson, *Education and Experience*, p. 9.
[64] Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 25.
[65] John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia 1880 – 1939* (London 1992), p. *vii*.
[66] Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 112.
[67] Williams, *Culture and Society*, p. 308.

that one could indeed 'isolate' or 'seclude' oneself from wider social and cultural processes in this way was not only highly questionable, but was itself a kind of pathological delusion: 'The exile, because of his own personal position, cannot finally believe in any social guarantee: to him, because this is the pattern of his own living, almost all association… [becomes] suspect.'[68] Whilst, in his head, concepts such as '[d]emocracy, truth, art, equality, culture', can still be apprehended, 'in the street, the wind is everywhere' – 'the great and human tradition', begins to look like 'a kind of wry joke.'[69]   Least of all, Williams insisted, could any humanist or socialist intellectual be in a position defend or champion such ideals by turning themselves away from the major portion of human experience and activity.

In his otherwise critical two-part review of *The Long Revolution* in 1961 Thompson still found time to salute Williams' 'courage' in taking on the cultural establishment in the decade before 1956: 'With a compromised tradition at his back, and with a broken vocabulary in his hands', Thompson observed, Williams had done 'the only thing that was left to him: he took over the vocabulary of his opponents, followed them into the heart of their own arguments, and fought them to a standstill in their own terms.' Terry Eagleton would later recall how, as 'a disgruntled working-class teenager with cultural interests' in Salford in the late 1950s, 'encountering Raymond Williams and his work was an extraordinary liberation, as though suddenly in an utterly alien atmosphere one… [had] found a person who seemed to be speaking one's own language, and speaking it in a much more developed and articulate way than one could oneself… It provided a point where somebody like myself, primarily brought up in literary training, could connect up with a wider politics.'[70] Equally, for Fred Inglis, reading Williams in the early 1960s was 'a life changer'; his 'large, [if] never quite grasped purpose' seemed to 'recharge the lost veins of English romantic socialism… [and] make them glow again in the body politic.'[71]

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[68] Ibid., p. 310.
[69] Ibid., p. 304.
[70] Eagleton, 'Keeping the Revolution Alive', p. 30.
[71] Fred Inglis, *Raymond Williams*, (London & New York, 1995), p. 138.

A British Cultural Revolt?

The relationship between new leftism and the 'anger' of the 1950s is more complex than some analyses suggest. From early on AYM and New Leftists were identified as more or less equivalent 'products of an important and developing re-structuring of British social life.'[72] Elsewhere John Mander highlighted, 'the attitude of many on the New Left who regard Mr. Wesker, Mr. Osborne, and Mr, Braine as *their* authors, and any criticism of them as a political attack on the New Left'.[73] Lynne Segal has claimed that '[t]he men of the New Left identified strongly with the tough, amoral, cynical, invariably misogynist heroes of Allan [*sic*] Sillitoe, John Osborne and others', seeing in the association, the perpetuation of a pathological cultural chauvinism that would not be properly challenged until the 1970s: 'Women were never to be trusted but treated as part of the system trying to trap, tame and emasculate men. A stifling domesticity had killed the spirit and guts of men, these 'rebels' declared and women were to blame.' [74] Similarly, Michael Kenny suggests that 'the anger, frustration and passion of writers such as John Braine and John Osborne appealed strongly to New Left sensibilities', reflecting as it did, 'a shared sense of 'masculine rage' which often reinforced male dominance within New Left politics.'[75] It is important, however, not to confuse the New Left's attempts to contextualise 'anger' with any personal identification with 'angry young men' themselves.

As it was, reviewing Kenneth Allsop's, *The Angry Decade*, in May 1958, Richard Hoggart found a book so depressing he felt personally 'shamed by the picture which [emerged] of [the] present cultural situation.' Whilst accepting Allsop's general premise that the period had witnessed 'important class and cultural changes', most contemporary writers, Hoggart suggested, Allsop included, remained 'insufficiently aware of their nature':

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[72] Stanley Rothman, 'British Labor's 'New Left', in *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (September 1961), p. 400.

[73] Mander, *The Writer and Commitment*, p. 21.

[74] Lynne Segal, 'The Silence of Women in the New Left', in Archer et al, *Out of Apathy*, p. 115.

[75] Kenny, *The First New Left*, p. 99. Eagleton: 'I was… fascinated at the time by the so-called angry young men… I read *Look Back in Anger*, *Lucky Jim* and *Room at the Top*, and tried to imitate their truculent iconoclastic style in my own unglamorous existence… they were putting what I saw as my own culture – provincial, working-class, vaguely leftist, chip-on-the-shoulder – on the map, and this was deeply exciting.'

> I think some of these writers are talented, but they are neither as good nor as bad as they have often been painted. I think they reveal something about contemporary social changes, though not as much as we are often invited to believe. Many of us are so parochially involved in our own social and cultural situation that we lose our literary perspective when we discuss such a group.'[76]

Equally, for Williams' 'angry' writing was best understood as just the latest mutation in a long-running, if increasingly diminishing literary subgenre, '[t]he fiction of special pleading… taking one person's feelings and needs as absolute'[77]

> The paradox of these novels is that on the one hand they seem the most real kind of contemporary writing – they were welcomed because they recorded so many actual feelings – and yet on the other hand their final version of reality is parodic and farcical. This illustrates the general dilemma: these writers start with real personal feelings, but to sustain and substantiate them, in their given form, the world of action in which they operate has to be pressed, as it were inevitably, towards caricature…To set these feelings in our actual world, rather than in this world farcically transformed at crisis, would be in fact to question the feelings, to go on from them to a very difficult questioning or reality.[78]

Arguably, then, new leftists' accommodation of anger in the late 1950s was based less on the sense of an essential parity of purpose between themselves and the AYM, than it was on the tentative recognition of a mutual effort to open a new cultural space in which subjective feelings and emotions, generally deemed impermissible within the rigid British cultural discourse of the 1950s, might at last be acknowledged. 'I want to make people feel', Osborne 'declared' in 1957, 'to give them lessons in feeling. They can think afterwards.'[79] I wish 'to write about people in a way that will somehow give them an insight to an aspect of life which they may not have had before,' suggested Arnold Wesker: 'I want to impart to them some of the enthusiasm I have for that life. I want to teach.'[80]

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[76] Richard Hoggart, 'Confused Voices', in *The Observer* (25 May 1958) p. 16.
[77] Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 311.
[78] Ibid., pp. 310 – 311.
[79] Osborne, 'They Call This Cricket', p. 65.
[80] Arnold Wesker, 'Let Battle Commence!'[1958] reprinted in Charles Marowitz, Tom Milne & Owen Hale (eds.), *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama* (London 1965) p. 98.

As it was, the Lawrentian commitment to 'digging-out' the 'truth' of one's personal feelings, and *unconscious* motivations and drives was at the centre of the burgeoning 'angry' culture of the 1950s. As Clancy Sigal's *roman-à-clef* novel *The Secret Defector*, recalling Sigal's relationship with the novelist Doris Lessing in the late 1950s and early 1960s describes, a capacity to both register and endure one's inner psychic or emotional 'pain' was considered 'central'. Indeed, '[only] if you were prepared to confront and accept the supreme agony of self-knowledge' did one stand a 'chance, slim but real, of becoming a writer… Only the toughest most self-committed souls could take the blistering heat of digging into the fiery depths of their troubled shit-strewn psyches to come up with the pearl of knowledge that might, or might not, be the key to unlocking their talent. There were no guarantees.'[81] Nevertheless, as brash and as self-confident as 'angry' culture was often perceived at the time, and, indeed, since, the personal commitment to opening oneself to this potentially chaotic inner realm of pure feeling was often precarious. 'I am governed by fear every day of my life', Osborne confided to his diary in July 1959: 'Sometimes it is the first sensation I have in waking… Fear of getting hurt, of physical pain, of operations and surgeries, of my personal appearance, of spots on my back, over food, of being unable to express myself. Of being afraid at school… I am afraid of the dark. I am afraid of the dark hole and the pain from it which grips me everyday: that clenched warning which tightens the dark hole of my inside. It is fear, and I cannot rid myself of it. It numbs me, it sterilizes me, and I am empty, dumb and ignorant and afraid.'[82]

In recent years a tendency has emerged amongst certain historians to downplay the impact of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956, and perhaps, by implication, some of the wider historical significance of 1956 itself.[83] Dominic Sandbrook, for example, claims that '[m]ost theatre historians now agree that *Look Back in Anger* was not really a revolution after all, that the theatre of the early fifties was actually much more satisfying than the drama of the New Wave, and that other New Wave plays were more daring than *Look Back in Anger* anyway';[84] Dominic Shellard has

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[81] Clancy Sigal, *The Secret Defector* (New York, 1992), p. 23.
[82] Quoted in John Heilpern, *John Osborne: A Patriot for Us* (London 2006, p. 206.
[83] As John Heilpern observes: 'Ever since Osborne's death… eager revisionists have been sniping at the significance of *Look Back in Anger* as if there's a guerilla war going on.' Heilpern, *John Osborne*, p. 187.)
[84] Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London, 2005), p. 193.

questioned the play's preeminent place in evolutionary narratives of post-war British theatre;[85] whilst Dan Rebellato seeks to overturn a 'prevailing mythology' that would have us believe that all British theatre consisted of pre-Osborne was 'emotionally repressed, middle-class plays, all set in drawing rooms with French windows, as vehicles for stars whose only talent was to wield a cigarette holder and a cocktail glass while wearing a dinner jacket.'[86]

However parochial, or indeed, *conservative*, Osborne's personal artistic ambitions may have been – and notwithstanding the play's considerable aesthetic limitations – what *Look Back in Anger* did in 1956 was to help prise open a cultural space in which it became legitimate to both acknowledge and express feelings and attitudes that had, hitherto, simply not been permitted in British public discourse: thus the writer David Lodge recalls 'the delight and exhilaration its anti-establishment rhetoric afforded me, and the exactness with which it matched my own mood at that juncture in my life.'[87] Al Alvarez suggests 'Osborne gave the Silent Generation who came of age in the 1950s its voice – and it was truly liberating. Just terrific! You felt with *Look Back in Anger* that here is someone who knows how the rest of us think and talk'; likewise, for Kenneth Tynan '[t]he salient thing about Jimmy Porter was that we – the under thirty generation in Britain – recognised him on sight. We had met him; we had pub-crawled with him; we had shared bed-sitting rooms with him. For the first time, the theatre was speaking to us in our own language, on our own terms.'[88] Even the forty-three year-old Labour MP, Michael Foot, would subsequently describe how '[Osborne] came along and expressed all we thought more eloquently than we were doing.'[89]

For Hall, the play had been 'painful in its accuracy and immediacy, even for those' who, like him, 'would *not* ever have agreed that 'there were no brave causes left'; in Jimmy Porter, Osborne had 'struck a representative note; he had summed up the sense of inverted rage, the bitter raging against the cramped, *pusillanimous* forms of life…'

[85] Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War* (New Haven & London 1999), p. 47.

[86] Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama*, (London 1999). p. 2.

[87] Quoted in Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London, 1990; 1997) p. 14.

[88] Quoted in Carpenter, *The Angry Young Men*, p. 133.

[89] Quoted in Heilpern, *John Osborne*, p. 231.

that so many young people instinctively felt.[90] If Porter had seemed 'unbearable', Hall observed, it was merely 'because many of us were on the edge of finding all our relationships unbearable. And what we found in *Look Back* was the language which, at least at that moment, contained something of our sense of life.'[91] As the media historian John Caughie suggests, '[f]or many people, this transformed what it meant to be 'of the Left' in post-1956 Britain':

> [A] political culture a began to materialize which was inclusive rather than exclusive, in which being political meant something far more than membership of a party, in which politics was being part of being an intellectual, in which being an intellectual meant being left-wing, and in which culture was at the cutting edge of redefinitions and rebellions.'[92]

A *New* Left Culture?

It should be salutary reading for those who insist on emphasising the 'unique' political and cultural atmosphere of the later 1960s, (as opposed to the staid and conformist 1950s) to find Doris Lessing attributing 'something like the shimmer of sheet lightning, a glamour', to a moment in British history a full decade before 1968; indeed, for Lessing, '1958 was the International Geophysical Year, and there hasn't been a year like it for excitement, for wonder… Sometimes I meet people and 1958 comes up. 'My God, what a year that was! There couldn't ever be anything as exciting.'[93] A 1958 'Letter to Our Readers' in the Autumn edition of *New Reasoner* had even dared to acknowledge how, '[v]ery slowly, and sometimes with more sound than substance, it does seem that a 'new left' is coming into being in this country.'[94] Whilst, as yet, the letter observed, it still remained 'a mood rather than a movement', it was form or consciousness that was now finding expression even amidst 'the most diverse [social] elements':

> [M]embers of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: veteran left-wingers from the unions and 'Tribune' readers: young people shocked by the Notting Hill riots:

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[90] Hall, 'Something to Live For', p. 114.
[91] Ibid.
[92] John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture* (Oxford 2000), p. 61.
[93] Lessing, *Walking in the Shade*, pp. 262 – 263.
[94] Unsigned, 'Letter to Our Readers' (I), p. 137.

Victory of Socialism supporters: anti-Establishment crusaders from the universities; dissident Communists, striking new roots in the labour movement. It stretches from G. D. H. Cole to John Homer, and from Bill Jones, the busmen's leader, to Lindsay Anderson, film-maker and critic.[95]

'We are in the midst of a new movement', observed Wesker in 1958, 'ideas are stirring and the artist is beginning to realise that the man in the street affects his life so he must affect theirs'.[96] This new sensibility, Wesker suggested, had thus far 'produced the Universities and Left Review Club, Free Cinema, The Royal Court Theatre, our Civic theatre, Encore magazine and various resistance groups up and down the country.'[97] Elsewhere, assessing the extent of 'The New Left at Oxford', David Marquand detected the stirrings of a major attitudinal shift amongst the emerging generation of undergraduates: 'They are bored by those who see the Welfare State as the final stopping place, needing only minor repairs; and equally unattracted by the jaunty pronunciamientos of *Tribune*. Indeed they are scarcely concerned at all with politics as usually understood.' What Marquand invariably found instead, was an overarching obsession with 'culture'. 'Indeed', he suggested, 'to listen to some of the more devoted members of the new cult one would imagine that the final close-up of the latest American social realist film was of greater political significance than the latest election results.'[98] Correspondingly, a writer in the Oxford Labour Club journal, *Clarion*, observed that, 'for many thoughtful people the years of political neutralism are now over… The process of rethinking about the values of Socialism has acquired a greater momentum… I do not think it is an exaggeration to talk about a revival on the Left':

Look Back in Anger, some of the contributions to *Declaration*, the successful emergence of the *Universities and Left Review*, the appearance of the term 'the Establishment', and the argument it has stirred up, the H-Bomb campaign, *The Uses of Literacy*, and the renewed debate about 'involvement' and 'commitment' in the

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[95] Ibid. p. 137.
[96] Wesker, 'Let Battle Commence!', p.101.
[97] Ibid.
[98] David Marquand, 'The New Left at Oxford: Against Hurrying on Down', in *The Manchester Guardian* (18 August 1958), p. 4.

arts – all these have in different ways woken us up to the fact that there are still tremendous political and social problems which demand our thought and action.[99]

Michael Rustin recalls how '[a] visible but creative minority culture of the left emerged in most of the arts and also in most branches of academic activity', underpinned by the New Left's Clubs and discussion groups, and even summer schools for the most 'committed'. [100] Writing in 1961, Mander suggested that whilst the New Left 'may have few political achievements to its credit as yet', it could already 'be said to be justified… by its literary first fruits.'[101] 'Michael Horovitz's poetry magazine *New Departures* (launched in 1959), with its five hundred jazz and poetry readings, complemented *New Left Review* and its clubs.'[102] Writing in 1961, Stanley Rothman observed that 'even the elite *New Station and Nation* is beginning to take cognizance of its [the New Left's] analyses'.[103] 'From 1958 to 1961, the English theatre was quickly and unalterably transformed by what in 1956 had only been portents.'[104] Rebellato suggests that '[r]elations between the [Royal] Court and the New Left [in this period] were mutual and intimate'.[105] The experimental London theatre collective, 'In-Stage', established in 1958, offered 'a non-commercial theatre devoted to new writers and new plays'. As the group's founder, Charles Marowitz described it, 'the intention was to create a permanent company of actors which would train together, play together and develop together. A company that would deliberately 'experiment' for the best reason of all: to see what happens.'[106]

The original Free Cinema Manifesto in 1956 had already set out what was described as the 'common attitude' of the filmmakers, above all, 'a belief in freedom, in the importance of people and in the significance of the everyday.'[107] In time, this would be broadened to encompass a parallel hostility to a prevailing 'British cinema still obstinately class-bound; still rejecting the stimulus of contemporary life, as well as

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[99] Quoted in Dennis Potter, *The Glittering Coffin* (London 1960), pp. 99 – 100.
[100] Rustin, 'The New Left as a Social Movement', p. 124.
[101] Mander, *The Writer and Commitment*, p. 21.
[102] Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe 1850 – 2000* (Oxford ,2002), p. 356.
[103] Rothman, 'British Labor's 'New Left', p. 393.
[104] Quoted in Marowitz et al, *The Encore Reader*, p. 75.'
[105] Rebellato, *1956 and All That*, p. 20.
[106] Charles Marowitz, 'In-Stage', in *New Left Review*, No. 10 (July-August 1961), p. 51.
[107] Lindsay Anderson, Lorenza Mazzetti, Karel Reisz, & Tony Richardson, 'Free Cinema Manifesto' (London 1956), p. 1.

the responsibility to criticise; still reflecting a metropolitan, southern English culture which excludes the rich diversity of tradition and personality which is the whole of Britain.'[108] As the film critic David Robinson would later reflect, 'one of the really important things about Free Cinema was that it was not standing alone… [but] that it was part of a whole cultural current and whole cultural upsurge in this country.'[109]

Elsewhere, the first of Charles Parker's, Ewan MacColl's and Peggy Seeger's pioneering *Radio Ballads* series (1958 −'64) was broadcast in July 1958. Recognition is slowly beginning to emerge of Charles Parker as 'an important but strangely neglected figure in the history of the New Left in England.'[110] As well as being a Cambridge-educated History graduate, and wartime submarine commander, Parker was also 'a committed Socialist and Trade Unionist… concerned with the wider world.'[111] Correspondingly, as an innovative features producer for BBC Radio in the Midlands during the 1940s and 1950s, Parker had already directed his efforts towards the 'recovery and popularisation of working class experience'.[112]

Parker insisted that the *Ballads* should be concerned not 'with processes but with people's attitudes to them; not with things but with people's relationship to those things, and with the way in which those attitudes and relationships were expressed in words.'[113] Such an insistence on so-called 'ordinary' people, talking about their own lives, in their own words, was itself a bold innovation. Until this point, most British broadcasting orthodoxy has suggested that allowing people to simply to 'speak for themselves' was far too unpredictable. As Geoffrey Bridson, a BBC producer in the 1930s later recalled: 'That the man in the street should have anything vital to contribute to broadcasting was an idea slow to gain acceptance. That he should actually use broadcasting to express his opinions in his own unvarnished words, was

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[108] Anderson et al, 'Free Cinema 3: Look at Britain', National Film Theatre Booklet (May 1957), p. 2.

[109] Quoted in a panel discussion on 'Free Cinema', held at the National Film Theatre in London on 22 March, 2001; transcript available at http://explore.bfi.org.uk/4e674f2c0cadb [accessed 12 February, 2014, at 1.30pm].

[110] Kevin Myers, 'Cultures of History: The New Left, South Asians, and Historical Memory in Post-War England', in Irial Glynn & J. Olaf Kleist (eds.), *History, Memory and Migration: Perceptions of the Past and the Politics of Incorporation* (London 2012), p. 37. For a fuller discussion of Parker's career and influence see Paul Long, *Only in the Common People: The Aesthetics of Class in Post-War Britain* (Cambridge 2008), pp. 137 – 174.

[111] Richard Groves, Mary Barker & Phillip Donnellan, 'The Charles Parker Archive' in *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January, 1983), p. 147.

[112] Myers, 'Cultures of History', p. 37.

[113] Peggy Seeger, quoted in Cox, *Set into Song*, p. 89.

regarded as almost the end of all good social order.'[114] As Cox describes it: 'The Radio Ballad creators made listener and programme-maker alike realise that 'ordinary' people can tell extraordinary stories. That to do them justice, scripts, actors and narrator are not only unnecessary; they're inadequate.'[115]

As such, the *Ballads* provided an insight into 'ways of life' – the turn of the century herring-fishing communities of Northumberland… (*Singing the Fishing*), miners describing… (*The Big Hewer*) – which, to many listeners, even in the 1950s, might well have seemed to have come from a different world altogether. Beyond this, however, the *Ballads* also strove to capture some of the representative hopes and anxieties of a rapidly changing *contemporary* national culture and society: English and Scottish teenagers (*On the Edge*); the building of Britain's first three-lane motorway (*Song of a Road*). Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel's *The Popular Arts* (1964) would later identify the *Radio Ballads* as 'the only truly imaginative attempt to use sound broadcasting creatively', bringing, for the first time, radio production into focus 'as a distinctive art form in its own right.' [116]

By the beginning of the 1960s, even commercial Granada Television could be seen to be 'waving a slightly tarnished left-wing banner'.[117] Programmes such as Sydney Newman's 'groundbreaking' *Armchair Theatre* series (1956 – '74) gave 'unprecedented' access to young working-class writers and actors; whilst Tony Warren's 'soap opera' *Coronation Street* (1960 –) introduced a version of 'provincial' working-class culture to a regular weekly audience of millions.[118] The pioneering 'arts and culture' documentary series, *Tempo* (1960 – '68) pursued a fluid, open-ended remit, incorporating features on cinema, theatre, music, dance, photography and literature, as well as original short films and experimental arts pieces. Correspondingly, the series would later come to be regarded as instrumental in

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[114] Quoted in Peter Cox, *Set into Song: Ewan MacColl, Charles Parker, Peggy Seeger and the Radio Ballads* (London 2008), p. 67.

[115] Cox, *Set into Song*, p. *iv*.

[116] Stuart Hall & Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts: A Critical Guide to the Mass Media* (London 1964), p. 259.

[117] John McGrath, 'Clive Goodwin: 1932 – 1977' in *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 1978), p. 234.

[118] Tony Garnett, 'Working in the Field' in Sheila Rowbotham & Huw Benyon (eds.), *Looking at Class: Film, Television and the Working Class in Britain* (London 2006), p. 72. On the strength of *Armchair Theatre*'s success, Newman was later 'poached' by the BBC to become its Head of Drama.

'introducing exponents of a counter-ideology, like R. D. Laing, Joan Littlewood, Adrian Mitchell and many others, to audiences brought up on the mandarin culture of the early '60s.'[119]

Signifying Nothing?

'There was a point', Williams would later reflect, 'quite evident to me between the publication of *The Long Revolution* and *Communications*, and evident in the most public way in reactions to the Pilkington Report, when a genuine and powerful counter-attack [to the New Left] was mounted and developed.'[120] Such 'reactions', Williams suggested – typified by the ruling establishment's 'absorption, containment and apparent neutralization of the offending ideas' – were, alas, all-too 'familiar in the long history of English attempts at change.'[121] Writing in 1961, John Mander observed how new-left calls to 'commitment' had come to be portrayed by most critics as simply 'a left-wing plot to rape innocent authors and press them into the latest anti-bomb or anti-apartheid campaign.'[122] Elsewhere, Thompson questioned why it was that 'this particular attack should have been mounted against the New Left at this moment.'[123]

In what was ostensibly solicited as an article celebrating Williams' reappointment to Cambridge in 1961, Maurice Cowling, writing in the *Cambridge Review* identified Williams as a figure currently holding a 'central place' amongst a considerable 'group of English radicals, lapsed Stalinists, academic Socialists and intellectual Trotskyites… with others from the extra-mural boards, the community centres and certain Northern universities'. [124] Williams' biographer, John Higgins, has argued that

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[119] McGrath, 'Clive Goodwin', pp. 234 – 237.
[120] Raymond Williams, 'Preface', in *Communications* (London 1966), p. 11. Elsewhere, Williams recalled the '[unforgettable] degree of hostility' which greeted the publication of *The Long Revolution* in 1961, including 'a full-scale attack of the most bitter kind in certain key organs. The *TLS* was particularly violent and *ad hominem*.' (Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 133.)
[121] Williams, 'Preface', p. 11. See Williams F. Warde, 'Who Will Change the World? The New Left and the Views of C. Wright Mills', in *International Socialist Review*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Summer 1961), pp. 67 – 79.
[122] Mander, *The Writer and Commitment*, p. 12.
[123] Thompson, 'Revolution Again!', p. 20.
[124] Maurice Cowling, 'Mr Raymond Williams', *The Cambridge Review*, (May 27th 1961), p. 546, quoted in Higgins, *Raymond Williams*, p. 50.

Cowling's article 'signals some of the real vehemence with which 'the Establishment' responded both to Williams and to the issues raised by the New Left'. Indeed, in Higgins' assessment: 'Never in the history of the university had a new lecturer been treated to such an unwelcoming welcome.'[125] Elsewhere, writing in a similar vein to Cowling in the *Times Literary Supplement*, Julian Gould bemoaned what he saw as 'the small group of ex-communists who have attained such power over the New Left and have skillfully used it as a vehicle for reviving and publishing their Marxist faith';[126] in the *Political Quarterly*, Bernard Crick lamented how the 'fund of inchoate idealism' stemming from the young radicals associated with the *ULR* had latterly come to be 'taken for a ride by a few old Marxists who know what they want';[127] whilst speaking over the course of three radio broadcasts for the BBC's Third Programme, J. M. Cameron attacked the 'vestigial Bolshevism' within certain new-left thinking, and the Marxist 'opiates' smuggled in by older representatives of the *New Reasoner* faction.[128]

Nevertheless, as questionable, or misplaced, as some of these contemporary critiques may have been it was increasingly clear that, by this stage, the optimism of 1958-9 had already largely dissipated. Indeed, for many, the general critical mauling in the national press (and elsewhere), that greeted Osborne's misconceived musical satire, *The World of Paul Slickey* in September 1959 seemed to symbolise more than just Osborne's limitations as a dramatist, but a more general loss of impetus and direction in the cultural revolt itself.[129] Correspondingly, assessing the ultimate effect of the previous three years activity, the actor and critic, John Whiting, suggested that whilst cries of 'Forward' had now become commonplace, the wider 'struggle at the Royal Court Theatre and elsewhere… for theatre to take on a greater social and political

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[125] Higgins, *Raymond Williams*, p. 51.

[126] Julian Gould, *Times Literary Supplement* (September 16 1960), quoted in Thompson, 'Revolution Again!', p. 20.

[127] Bernard Crick, 'Socialist Literature in the 1950s', in *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (July 1960), p. 372.

[128] J. M. Cameron, 'Agents and Victims – The 'New Left' in Britain III', in *The Listener* (September 22 1960), p. 460.

[129] As Charles Marowitz wrote in his review: 'The great point about *Paul Slickey* is not that it is a badly hashed, anti-musical comedy, but that it is a weapon, naively provided by *the* angry young man himself, with which a fed up British bourgeoisie can clobber that surly, intellectual movement which had been razzing it since the end of the war.' (Charles Marowitz, 'The World of Paul Slickey: Review' in *Encore*, Vol. 6, No. 5 (September-October 1959), p. 20.

responsibility… [appeared to be] dwindling from our sight.'[130] Writing in *Encore* that same year, Arnold Wesker agreed that a new direction or approach would be necessary if the 'gains' of 1956 – 58 were to be anything more than superficial:

> Free Cinema has come and is going, the attendances at the *Universities and Left Review* Club are dropping, the faith people have had in a theatre like the Royal Court is gradually being lost, and the men and women who spoke to us two years ago with such concern and intelligence are now bored with our company and our groups.[131]

Responding to Wesker's comments, Hall acknowledged the need for a general reassessment: 'It would be reassuring to think that a couple of showings of *O Dreamland* would bring the Rank Organization to a dead stop, that *We Are the Lambeth Boys* would prevent race riots in Notting Hill, and that by now every new housing estate would have had its open-air performance of *Chicken Soup With Barley*. It simply isn't as easy as all that.'[132] 'It is easy', Hall suggested, 'to respond when everyone else is doing so, when Lindsay Anderson's *Stand Up! Stand Up!* breaks the sound barrier in *Sight and Sound*, and when Jimmy Porter first starts shoveling back into the Dress Circle of the Royal Court some of the stiff soil from the 'chalk garden' of the West End stage. But the time we need stamina and the will to survive is not after *Look Back* or *The Entertainer*, but after *Paul Slickey*. That is the real test.'[133]

In February 1960, an unsigned *Guardian* editorial lamented vicissitudes of 'The Self-conscious Age': 'The trouble', it suggested, was not that people were unaware 'of the social structure all around them', nor 'the changes within it', but rather that they had become obsessed 'with defining minutely their own place' within it, as well as 'that of their immediate neighbours' – 'Our trouble seems to be not the difficulty of grasping the whole of our advanced society, but the limits set by our inward-looking self-consciousness in our visions of our own island parish.'[134] Three days earlier, reviewing a new 'condition of England' book by a former Oxford 'scholarship boy'

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[130] John Whiting, 'At Ease in a Bright Red Tie', in Marowitz et al, *The Encore Reader*… For Whiting, the problem… 'Plays are being produced which rely for their effect on a false naivety. The problems they present are being simplified to a point of non-existence.'
[131] Arnold Wesker, 'To React – To Respond', in *Encore* Vol. 6, No. 3 (May-June 1959), p. 6.
[132] Hall, 'Something to Live For', p. 113.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Unsigned editorial, 'The Self-Conscious Age', in *The Guardian* (10 February 1960), p. 8.

from the Forest of Dean, called Dennis Potter, Raymond Williams observed how difficult it was latterly becoming for such individuals 'to be both young and angry, for these natural conditions have been compelled into a stock figure which, cancelling personality and overriding particular opinion, leads directly to patronage or the pigeon-hole, and in any case saves its users the trouble of listening.'[135]

Conclusion

A contemporary analysis of the New Left's political and cultural inroads in the early 1960s acknowledged how 'the teenage thing' latterly appeared to have acquired a 'momentum, a cultural self-confidence, and a semi political outlet which it did not have in 1958.'[136]Even at the time, it was apparent to some new leftists that much of what was being embraced as 'socialism', by the 'angry' young generation was, perhaps, no such thing at all – at least, in any orthodox political or ideological sense of the word – but, merely a form of shorthand for a series of personal values or preferences: 'anti-authoritarianism', 'individualism', 'irreverence', 'authenticity', 'openness', 'free-expression' etc. – which, at that precise moment, seemed to be in conflict with the prevailing assumptions and values of the British 'cultural establishment'. As it was, by the late 1960s, most AYM 'had become defenders rather than critics of the status quo, unabashedly conservative domestically, pro-American internationally'; as the critic John Rodden described it: 'The *avant garde* had become a rearguard.' [137]

In a series of interviews given to the editors of *NLR* in the late 1970s, Williams would acknowledge how he and his fellow new leftists had 'overestimated the possibilities of action by cultural change on the left.' Recalling their 'emphasis towards new forms of struggle, indeed what is now widely called 'cultural revolution'', Williams commented:

> At the time I would probably have said that this is new work relevant to what's happening now – which will enter contemporary politics, while the other is just

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[135] Raymond Williams, 'Young Socialist', in *The Guardian* (7 February 1960), p. 20.

[136] Christopher Driver, 'New Left and Old Demonstrators', in *The Guardian* (14 February 1963), p. 8.

[137] John Rodden, *Every Intellectual's Big Brother: George Orwell's Literary Siblings* (Austin, 2006), p. 111.

reliving the past. But I now think, with the advantage of hindsight, that the pain of reworking that past was necessary: and the extent to which it was not carried through and this other style for a time took over was a weakness which was heavily paid for later.[138]

Nevertheless, all this 'sound and fury' did not 'signify nothing': new leftists contextualised and gave meaning to the 'angry' post-war 'mood'; they opened up a new kind of cultural 'space' within which a generation were better able to orientate themselves; they helped to establish the principle of ceaseless cultural expansion, as well as implementing some of the cultural apparatus through which this could be furthered. To this extent, one might even trace a line from the new-left culture of the late 1950s, and the 'pop' culture of the 1960s with groups like The Beatles, The Animals, The Rolling Stones and The Kinks soon coming to march their 'winkle-pickered' feet into the same 'provincial' clubs, unions, and village-halls that, just a few years earlier, had played host to CND activists, Brechtian drama groups, jazz and folk music aficionados, and even, one or two New Left speakers themselves. As David Widgery would subsequently recall, the 'networks of folk-clubs, poetry magazines, R[hythm] and B[lues] and art colleges' in the late 1950s provided the basis for the 'indigenous bohemian network within which the radical 'underground' and 'counter-cultural' prerogatives of 1960s radicalism were both formulated and contested. Indeed, in Widgery's view, what was characterised as the 'underground press' in Britain, can be seen as simply 'the journalistic expression of a social sea change which had been welling up since the 1950s.' Even Perry Anderson would acknowledge how the inroads made by the early New Left's cultural efforts had constituted nothing less than 'a major achievement': through their efforts, Anderson acknowledged, British intellectuals in the 1950s had been 'intimately, inextricably plunged into their society'; a 'process' had been initiated which now 'affected the whole direction' of British intellectual culture, and which had made 'it much more socially responsible than its counterparts elsewhere.'[139] '[T[he publication of the Pilkington Report', meanwhile, 'testified to the impact of the New Left's critique even on the official politics of the period.'[140] As such, Anderson observed, Britain in 1965 '[remained]… the only capitalist country in the world in which… a serious

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[138] Williams, *Politics and Letters*, pp. 364 – 365.
[139] Anderson, 'The Left in the Fifties', p. 17.
[140] Ibid.

socialist programme for the transformation of the system of communications' could be found. In summary, Anderson concluded, the cultural impact of the New Left from the late 1950s onwards had represented 'a renaissance of the deepest tradition of social criticism in English society since the industrial revolution, a renaissance which continues today.' [141]

> [I]f there is anything the 'new left' has tried to contribute, it is the sense that the thread of humanism, feeling and revolt passes through every one of us. It is a kind of life-line of struggle and commitment which 'connects' us all, whatever our differences of emphasis and preferences… What matters is that some of those who have tasted 'life itself', have lost the appetite for anything cheaper and shallower: and that those people have the guts to live out the panic and the isolation which is part of the forms of life in *this* society and come up again for air. [142]

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[141] Ibid.
[142] Hall, 'The Big Swipe', p. 59.

Chapter Three

Laureate of New Leftism? Dennis Potter's 'Sense of Vocation'

In acquiring one's conception of the world one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting… The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory.

> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London 1971), p. 324.

[Y]ou've got this superfluity of clues, which is what we all have, and very few solutions – maybe no solution – but the very act of garnering the clues and the act of remembering, not merely an event but how that event has lodged in you and how that event has effected the way you see things, begins to assemble a system of values… [It is] about the way that we can protect that sovereignty that we have and that is all we have and it is the most precious of all the human capacities, even beyond language… and that out of this morass, if you like, of evidence, the clues and searchings and strivings, which is the metaphor for the way we live, we can start to put up the structure called self… out of which… we can walk … saying at least I know and you know better than before what it is we are.

> Dennis Potter, 'An Interview with Alan Yentob, BBC2, 1987, *Seeing the Blossom: Two Interviews, a Lecture and a Story* (London 1994), p. 71.

Ideas. You know what an idea is? Mmm? Mmm? No? Well I'll tell you. An idea is stronger than an army, sharper than a lance, more enduring than an empire and more slippery than an eel. Ideas are what we fear. You understand?

> 'Pontius Pilate', in Dennis Potter's *Son of Man* (London 1968), pp. 80 – 81.

On the 25 August 1958, at 9.30pm, viewers of BBC television were just settling down to the second instalment of a new six-part documentary series, *Does Class Matter?*, written and presented by the then Labour MP and later peer, Christopher Mayhew. Introducing the programme, billed under the subtitle 'Class in Private Life', Mayhew explained how the evening's episode would be an attempt to explore some of the difficulties now being faced by young working-class undergraduates at Oxford University, as they struggle to negotiate the 'torn loyalties and perpetual adjustments' brought about by their sudden confrontation with an unfamiliar and thus potentially alienating social and cultural environment.[1] As Mayhew's voice-over continued, the

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[1] Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *Dennis Potter* (London, 1998), p. 81.

screen cut to a shot of a tall, somewhat ungainly, figure strolling across an almost picture-perfect Oxford college quadrangle: 'Here', Mayhew explained, 'one of the undergraduates is a miner's son from the Forest of Dean… In [such a]… life we see the problem of social class in its modern setting.'[2] As the camera cut again to a modest book-lined room, viewers were confronted with a slightly diffident yet peculiarly candid and articulate young man as he proceeded to deliver a long, free-ranging exposition on what he saw as the numerous emotional and psychological tolls exacted by contemporary class relations:

> There's a new kind of classlessness which I am now, thanks to being at Oxford, quite incapable of ever wanting. And I thought that I could keep these two worlds apart, neatly, almost callously. There's home, and there's Oxford. Both have their tensions, but I always kidded myself that I have a certain kind of ability, and I can get through without bothering too much about the tensions [that] I can overcome them, in fact. But it is impossible… you can't just communicate a whole medium of experience which people haven't got, for the most part.[3]

This was the first encounter of a British television audience with Dennis Potter, who, over the course of the next three and a half decades would come to redefine the parameters of British television drama to such an extent that, by the time of his death in May 1994, it was suggested he had 'made a more far-reaching contribution to the medium than any other individual since the BBC's founder Lord Reith.'[4]

Though still widely heralded today as a television playwright of unparalleled creative originality and imaginative reach, Potter is also invariably approached as something of an anomaly – an 'auteur', whose highly subjective and often wilfully idiosyncratic work seems to defy any obvious categorisation or, indeed, fruitful comparison with that of his immediate contemporaries. Neither as overtly 'political' as Ken Loach, John McGrath, or Trevor Griffiths, as piously moralising as Peter Watkins, or as intimately familiar as Alan Bennett, Potter's work appears to remain enclosed within

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[2] Ibid.
[3] Quoted in Carpenter, *Dennis Potter*, pp. 81 – 82. Carpenter describes how later in the programme, Mayhew interviews Richard Hoggart, who refers to the Potter interview as 'most moving' for its account of the same 'tensions and stresses' he had himself experienced as an undergraduate at Leeds University in the late 1930s.
[4] W. Stephen Gilbert, *Fight & Kick & Bite: The Life and Work of Dennis Potter* (London, 1995), p. 26.

a cultural field all its own.[5] As Hannah Arendt once observed of Franz Kafka: 'Innumerable attempts to write [like him], all of them dismal failures, have only served to emphasise [his] uniqueness, that absolute originality which can be traced to no predecessor and suffers no followers. This is what society can least come to terms with and upon which it will always be very reluctant to bestow its seal of approval.'[6] As it is, the vast majority of Potter's work still remains uncomfortably outside what Arendt terms 'our usual framework of reference'; the frequently disturbing themes it explores – childhood abuse, sexual perversion, betrayal, guilt, shame, emotional trauma and psychological breakdown – ensured, from early on, that viewers rarely emerged from a Potter production untouched. No less than five of his television plays were banned or censured by the BBC between 1965 and 1980. In addition to this, *Blackeyes* (1989), the last major series he produced for the corporation in his lifetime, was heavily criticised for what most reviewers saw as its 'misconceived' exploration of cultural misogyny and sexual objectification; Potter, it was suggested, in the process of examining his own psychosexual peccadilloes had ultimately succumbed to them, contracting the very social disease he had sought to cure.[7]

In the decade following his death, Potter's reputation came under even more sustained assault: the general bemusement which greeted the posthumous transmission of his much-hyped final television productions, *Karaoke* (1996) and *Cold Lazarus* (1996), seemed, at least to some critics, to reaffirm the picture of a talent that had already been taken on its own assessment for far too long;[8] whilst, the publication of

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[5] Though Jefferson Hunter has recently drawn an interesting parallel between Potter's work and that of the Liverpool-born filmmaker Terence Davies: According to Hunter, 'both [Potter and Davies are] unashamedly autobiographical artists… from humble origins… both sensed their differences early on; both moved away (Potter via a scholarship to Oxford, Davies via a long process of self-education) and became successful metropolitan intellectuals; both looked on their origins with a mixture of relief and guilt at having escaped from it.' (Jefferson Hunter, *English Filming, English Writing* (Bloomington 2010), p. 244. For a fuller discussion of Potter's credentials as an 'auteur' see, Rosalind Coward, 'Dennis Potter and the Question of the Television Author', *Critical Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (December 1987), pp. 79 – 87.

[6] Hannah Arendt, 'Introduction' in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York 1968), p. 3

[7] See, for example, Jenny Diski, *Blackeyes*, in *New Statesman* (15 December 1989), p. 32; Richard Last, 'The Emptiness of Potter's *Blackeyes*', in *Daily Telegraph* (21 December 1989), p. 13; Madeleine Pallas, 'The Pain that Drives Potter Potty', in *The Sun* (30 November 1989), p. 12; John Russell, 'Is *Blackeyes* Just Blue Nonsense?', in *The Sunday Express* (3 December 1989), p. 12.

[8] See A. A. Gill, 'Over-indulged to the Bitter End', in *The Sunday Times*: Culture Supplement, (28 April 1996), p. 36; Mark Steyn, 'The Dramatist Who Made an Art Form Out of Plagiarism', in *The Times* (9 November 1996), p. 28. Such views have not been confined to the British right-wing press; in an article reexamining the construction of Potter's critical reputation, the literary historian, Yael Zarhy-Levo, asserts how Potter was always 'a major commentator on his own work… masterfully exploiting

Humphrey Carpenter's 'authorised' biography in 1998 elicited a fresh glut of 'Dirty Den' style headlines, as 'revelations' about Potter's private life, and apparent sexual indiscretions, contributed to what was, by then, an already growing critical reappraisal of his work emphasising the supposedly overriding theme of sexual obsession.[9] In recent years, scholars such as Glen Creeber, Peter Stead, and, above all, John R. Cook, have done much to reassert both the diverse thematic reach of Potter's work (the latter, for a period virtually leading the march of academic 'Potter Studies' singlehandedly).[10]

Yet, perhaps above all, it is Potter's place within the firmament of post-war leftist 'cultural politics' that has been most seriously overlooked. Bert Hogenkamp's, *Film, Television and the Left: 1950 – 1970* (2000), for example, fails to find room for even one reference to Potter, despite the book's primary concentration on developments in Britain. Similarly Sheila Rowbotham's and Huw Benyon's edited collection, *Looking at Class: Film, Television and the Working Class in Britain* (2001), offers only fleeting recognition of one of Potter's early plays. Elsewhere, in 2000, the editors of the first major collection of scholarly criticism on Potter's life and work challenged what they suggested was a latent attempt by certain 'cultural studies' critics' to 'claim

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the favourable circumstances of British television during the 1960s in shaping the reception, and eventual acclaim, of his innovative work.' At the same time, Zarhy-Levo also points to what she sees as 'other critics' extensive reliance on, and endorsement of, his [Potter's] commentaries… in shaping their own perceptions of his dramas.' (Yael Zarhy-Levo, 'The Making of Artistic Reputation: Dennis Potter, Television Dramatist', in *Theatre Research International*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Summer 2009), p. 37.)

[9] See, for example, Richard Brooks, 'Sex Pest Dennis Potter's Obsessive Passions Revealed', in *The Observer* (29 March 1998), p. 1; Alison Pearson, 'TV's Mr Sex', in *The Observer* (22 October 1995), p. 15. As Potter's lifelong producer and collaborator, Kenith Trodd, explains: 'Dirty Den' was the nickname of a fictional character, Den Watts, who featured in the popular BBC TV soap opera, *Eastenders* (1985 -) during the 1980s. After the critical bloodbath Potter received in Britain for *Blackeyes* in 1989, it came to be applied to the dramatist by journalists of the British tabloid press, particularly those working for *The Sun* and *The News of the World*.' (Kenith Trodd, 'Whose Dennis Is It Anyway?', in Vernon W. Gras & John Cook (eds.), *The Passion of Dennis Potter: International Collected Essays* (London 2000), p. 237 *n*.

[10] See, for example, Ib Bondebjerg, 'Intertextuality and Metafiction: Genre and Narration in the Television of Dennis Potter', in Michael Skovmand & Kim Christian Schroder (eds.), *Media Cultures: Reappraising Transnational Media* (London & New York 1992), pp. 161 – 181; John R. Cook, *Dennis Potter: A Life on Screen* (Manchester 1995); and 'Message for Posterity': *The Singing Detective* (1986) 25 Years On', in *Journal of Screenwriting*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (August 2013), pp. 259 – 272; Glen Creeber, ''Banality with a Beat': Dennis Potter and the Paradox of Popular Music', in *Media, Culture, Society*, Vol. 18 (July 1996), pp. 501 – 508; and *Dennis Potter: Between Two Worlds – A Critical Reassessment* (London 1998); Bridget Fowler, 'Pierre Bourdieu, Social Transformation and 1960s British Drama', in *Theory, Culture, Society*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (June 2012), pp. 4 – 24; Peter Stead, *Dennis Potter* (Bridgend 1993); Neil Vickers, 'Religious Irony and Freudian Rationalism in Dennis Potter's *The Singing Detective* (1986), in *Literature and Theology*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (December 2006), pp. 411 – 423.

Potter for their own'.[11] Questioning the assertion that 'a cultural artifact can only be properly understood when placed in explicit relation to the context in which it was produced', they suggested that, in Potter's case, attempts 'to explain the writer in terms of his influences', invariably raises more questions than they answered.[12] Indeed, whilst acknowledging the 'profound effect' that early new-left 'theorists' like Hoggart and Williams may have had on the young Potter's early political and intellectual orientation, they expressed grave doubts about the value of attributing ''Left culturalist' arguments… to the entire following three decades of his creative writing'.[13] Correspondingly, in the same volume, Peter Stead, made the claim that '[m]uch of the enthusiasm' for Potter during his lifetime, had been based on a 'culturalist' 'misreading of his work'; indeed, whilst Potter's notable exchanges with television controllers, right-wing media figures and would-be moral 'watchdogs' such as Mary Whitehouse and Milton Shulman, appeared to confirm the writer as 'a pioneer and… champion of liberal causes', most of his work, Stead pointed out, was actually 'against the cultural grain of his era'; thus, whilst ''Left Culturalism' was still the order of the day for the Arts Establishment', more often than not, Stead observed 'Potter was talking openly, but with some sense of surprise, of Tory attitudes that he was discovering in himself.'[14]

Terms such as 'cultural studies', and 'Left culturalism', are themselves highly contested discursive categories and should, accordingly, be approached by historians with considerable caution. As Hall once asserted: '[C]ultural studies is not one thing… was never one thing'. Indeed, the notion of a singular, ideologically coherent, 'left culturalist' agenda (let alone 'school' or 'project') emerging at any point in the 1960s and 1970s is almost certainly based on an illusion; if nothing else, the profound theoretical and attitudinal divergences between cultural studies so-called founding fathers – Hall, Hoggart, Thompson, and Williams – can be shown to have precluded the possibility from the start.

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[11] Vernon W. Gras & John R. Cook, 'Class and Culture', in Gras et al, *The Passion of Dennis Potter*, p. 14.
[12] Ibid., p. 13.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Peter Stead, 'The Public and the Private in Dennis Potter', in Gras et al, *The Passion of Dennis Potter*, p. 27.

As Potter himself once pointed out, 'the question of what drives an artist or scientist' is often 'very much less interesting than what these compulsions produce';[15] nevertheless, as he also suggested elsewhere: 'It is an academic delusion to maintain that a writer can be so easily separated from his writing.'[16] 'Psychiatrists and biographers', he observed, 'have access to two kinds of evidence: the life and the work', and 'obviously one is the fruit of part of the other…'[17] Like his hero, William Hazlitt, Potter was a writer who 'used himself, used up himself'; he was 'a person prepared to dig into himself to expose the full dimensions of either an enthusiasm or a sadness.'[18] To some this 'self-conscious and deliberate re-working' of his own life and experiences must be seen to distinguish Potter as a master-manipulator, even a 'mythomane'.[19] Yet whilst it can perhaps be agreed that 'mere source-hunting will never provide the 'key' to Potter', it must also be said that to approach his work as simply the product of a *singular*, culturally uninflected, creative imagination is to obscure much of its wider cultural resonance and meaning. It is not simply a coincidence that what the critic Graham Fuller once identified as the major themes and preoccupations of Potter's drama between 1965 and 1980 could, with little modification, also stand as a roll-call of some of new leftism's own principal concerns over the same period:

> [P]olitical disillusionment (*Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton*, *Message for Posterity*); England's decay (*The Bonegrinder*) and ongoing social malaise (*Shaggy Dog*, *Paper Roses*); the role of popular culture (*Where the Buffalo Roam*, *Moonlight on the Highway*); sexual inhibition (*Alice*) and disgust (*Angels Are So Few*) born of puritanical repression; betrayal (*Traitor*) and guilt (*Stand Up, Nigel Barton*); the interplay between past and present, truth and fiction, reality and imagination; and the need for every human being… to understand his or her identity.[20]

Unlike most of his 'angry' counterparts in the 1950s, Potter never renounced his youthful leftism; indeed, from his earliest sociopolitical writings, journalism and plays, through to his celebrated final interview with Melvyn Bragg, recorded six

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[15] Dennis Potter, 'The Artist on the Doctor's Couch', in *The Times* (4 September 1972), p. 15.
[16] Dennis Potter, 'The Face at the Window', in *The Times* (3 August 1968), p. 15.
[17] Potter, 'The Artist on the Doctor's Couch', p. 15.
[18] Potter, 'The Face at the Window', p. 15.
[19] Philip Simpson, 'Review', in *Screen*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (Summer 1999), p. 225; 224
[20] Grahm Fuller, *Potter on Potter* (London, 1993), p. *iv*.

weeks before his death in April 1994, he perpetually reasserted his allegiance to a vision of democratic socialism associated with the 'moment of 1945'. As he put it to Bragg, the Attlee administration of 1945 – 51 had, for him, constituted 'one of the great governments of British history', mandated as it was, by a 'shared aim, a condition, a political aspiration' on behalf of a considerable majority of the British electorate.[21] Correspondingly, his enduring outrage at what he took to be the subsequent 'reversals' and 'betrayals' of successive Conservative and Labour governments alike, from the early 1950s onwards, would form the backbone of some of his most pointed social and cultural criticism.[22]

 Yet Potter's 'leftism' was always anything but conventional. Indeed in one of his earliest published writings, he declared his frustration with the 'temperature and drift of our domestic politics', and the related 'crisis of purpose and ideology that has afflicted the Labour Party.'[23] In such conditions, he suggested, 'apathy' amongst young people was not simply 'a matter of the wicked abdication of responsibility, a question of social choice, but a bewildered defensive reaction to the strange, sometimes accidental forces that have bled all emotive feelings of concern or guilt.'[24] Elsewhere, he admitted his difficulty in conceiving of politics as simply 'a side-product, a cultural diversion or even as a descriptive technique'; for him, 'politics' was something inscribed into the very texture of one's personal sense of the world; 'if socialism [had] any personal meanings, it [was] precisely in this deliberate act of involvement without squandering any of the rights of intellect and passion.'[25]

A *New* Left 'Mood'

For Potter, the part alluring, part alienating aura surrounding Oxford was just one of many tensions and ambiguities he associated with his transition from the tightly-knit working-class community of his childhood to a contemporary social and cultural environment in which 'merit' was fast becoming 'the only social criterion we have for

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[21] Dennis Potter, 'An Interview with Melvyn Bragg, Channel 4, April 1994', in Dennis Potter, *Seeing the Blossom: Two Interviews, a Lecture and a Story* (London 1994), p. 9.
[22] See, for example MacTaggart Lecture.
[23] Dennis Potter, 'Disillusion in Labour Youth: Where Apathy is a Defence', in *The Times* (April 27th 1959), p. 11.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Dennis Potter, Unpublished Early Draft of The Changing Forest', p. 6.

deciding the way in which people shall live.'[26] As he later reflected: 'On one level I wanted to part of it, longed for acceptance in it. On another level, I was already beginning to judge it and be the cocky scholarship boy… who's at the very moment of embracing it, compromising it.'[27] '[T]hose who were, by either accident of examination, dragged up the mountain, out of their old background, their old loyalties, their old assumptions…'[28]

Three weeks into his first term the Suez crisis had erupted. An editorial in the undergraduate magazine *Isis*, the following week, observed, how '[f]or the first time in years Oxford has thrown off its legendary apathy; protest meetings, whitewashed slogans, debates, lobbying groups to London – only the most cynical have deliberately remained aloof.'[29] In an article essaying the emergence of this 'New Left at Oxford', a young David Marquand had suggested that whilst a sceptic could be forgiven for assuming that all the 'sound and fury' signified nothing 'more profound than the self-importance of the protagonists… The sceptic would be wrong:

> This time there is something behind the headlines… Political activity – for years left
> to the semi-professionals of the political clubs and the Union – is once again
> becoming 'smart.' And the Left, once the dreariest of dreary political positions, is
> coming back into favour. It almost begins to look like the thirties all over again.[30]

Crucially, however, for Marquand, whereas in the 1930s, 'the characteristic Oxford revolutionary hailed from an impeccable upper-middle class background', the rebels of the 1950s were invariably 'working or lower middle class, products of the Welfare State revolution which reached Oxford after 1945.'[31] Correspondingly, for them, the working class was 'not a romantic abstraction', but a group comprised of the very 'boys they went to school with'; as such, Marquand concluded, '[u]niversity life' itself was now increasingly being 'viewed with a certain ambivalence'; whilst still acknowledged as the chief way of '[bringing about] personal advancement and more

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[26] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, p. 14.
[27] Potter, 'An Interview with Alan Yentob', p. 62.
[28] Potter, *The Nigel Barton Plays*, p. 66.
[29] Unsigned, 'Editorial', in *Isis*, (November 7th 1956), quoted in Carpenter, *Dennis Potter*, p. 57.
[30] David Marquand, 'The New Left at Oxford', in *The Manchester Guardian* (August 18th 1958), p. 4.
[31] Ibid.

cultural opportunities' it was also wracked with 'insecurity and the possibility of treachery to the past.'[32]

Potter himself would later recall the 'break-through into new life', and commensurate 'feeling of a lack of centre', that characterised the period immediately following 1956. The initial 'mood', he suggested, had rapidly yielded a wider consciousness that 'the newness of many of the problems [would] sooner or later have to be consolidated into a more consistent and fresher ideological approach'.[33] It was in this context that people had begun 'to talk of the 'new Left'… to distinguish the latest upsurge of radicalism from the 'good red-blooded Socialism boys.'[34] Over the next eighteen months, Potter recalled, these '*new* leftists' had stormed and occupied the top positions in the University Labour Club […] by far the largest Socialist student body in the country'.[35]

Potter would revisit 1956 at several points throughout his career: His breakthrough play, for example, *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton* (1965) incorporates footage of Aneurin Bevan's celebrated address to the anti-Suez demonstrators in Trafalgar Square on November 4th 1956; *Lay Down Your Arms* (1970) is set in the Cabinet War Office in Whitehall during the summer of 1956, and draws on Potter's own experiences of National Service a year earlier; finally, the six-part Channel Four series *Lipstick On Your Collar* (1993) revisits the 'mood' and atmosphere of the pivotal year, when 'a young Britain, associated with sex advertising, bright plastics and popular song' seemed at last to gain the 'permission to speak' from 'a cramped

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[32] Ibid. It is tempting to speculate on the identity of the 'prominent university Left-winger' who, in the same article, Marquand reports shouting at him, in a 'voice almost shaking with passion', that *Look Back in Anger* 'is a more important document than anything the Labour party has said since 1951.' There were, after all, few more prominent 'university left-wingers' at Oxford in August 1958 than Potter himself. Furthermore, in the next sentence, Marquand mentions the University Labour Club's proposal to put on a public performance of an, as yet, undecided Brecht play – 'hailed as a great victory by the Left' – at Oxford Town Hall. The play Marquand is referring to is almost certainly, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, starring none other than the twenty-three year old Potter in the role of Azdak. As Potter later described in *The Glittering Coffin*, the idea of putting on the play came about as 'a result of an urgent desire to formulate the language of 'commitment', the very atmosphere of our debates, arguments and discussions, into something more practical, more real.' He also quotes from the play's programme: 'We are doing this play because we believe that culture is a part of politics, and because we are enthusiastic.' (Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, pp. 102 –103.)
[33] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, p. 100.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid. pp. 100 – 101.

and old imperial country brought face to face with its own decline by the humiliating Suez crisis'.[36]

For Potter the early New Left's 'whole field of attack… [was] exhilarating'.[37] It was, he would later suggest, 'impossible not to feel excited, not to be aware of the growing momentum of a fresher, more intelligent probing of the boundaries of culture and society'.[38] The appearance of the *ULR* in early 1957 had immediately '[struck] an emotional chord and a feeling of intellect and excitement' for those, like him, struggling to orientate themselves amidst the suffocating 'traditionalism' and social elitism of Oxford.[39] Correspondingly, *Conviction* (1958), Norman MacKenzie's edited anthology of new-leftist writings, had had Potter's 'hair tingling with excitement and recognition…'; it was, he suggested, 'a genuine achievement that has delighted most of the people I know more than any other volume published over the last few years, with the exception, of course, of the work of Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams.'[40]

As the incumbent editor of *Isis* in 1958 Potter, sought 'faithfully' to '[transcribe] the mood', in the hope of '[bringing] together a lot of people who may even come to exert some influence in the years ahead.'[41] Correspondingly, writing in *NLR* in early 1961, Stuart Hall would identify Potter as one of the student magazine's few 'serious editors', a figure who had briefly 'shrugged off its 'Idols' and gossip, and pushed forward into more ruffled waters of national politics and events.'[42] In contrast, a rather less admiring contemporary portrait by Potter's fellow *Isis* contributor, the future Labour politician, Brian Walden, portrays Potter in this period as one who clearly believed that there was 'something intrinsically commendable about the 'mood of protest' itself regardless of its consequences:

> How does Dennis Potter excuse past errors, and present intent to go on committing
> future errors, without the slightest attempt to meet points which he has just admitted

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[36] Patrick Wright, 'The Last Acre of Truth', in *The Guardian*, Media Section (15 February 1993), p. 2.
[37] Ibid., p. 7.
[38] Ibid, p. 101.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., p. 8. As Potter suggests, in this period, 'the name Hoggart' came to be 'used as something of an incantation.'
[41] Ibid., p. 100.
[42] Stuart Hall, 'Student Journals', in *New Left Review*, No. 7 (January- February 1961), p. 50

are valid? 'Well, it's the mood,' he says petulantly, 'you cannot give up the mood'...
He approaches political discussion, not as a means of seeking facts or developing
conceptions with an eye to future action, but as a useful way of defining certain
attitudes, expressing psychological frustrations, and seeking temperamental
affinities... [He] supplies no definition of socialism, nor does any one definition of
socialism become apparent...[43]

Elsewhere, another of Potter's Oxford contemporaries, Jonathan Cecil, would recall
his primary impression of Potter, as 'this 'angry young man'… holding forth about
the state of the country and how deplorable it all was… And I thought, I've actually
met Jimmy Porter! I've met the character!'[44]

Even at this stage, however, Potter was expressing his distaste for what he saw as the
toxic 'mixture of optimistic innocence, fatuous generalisation and sudden angry
dogmatism' that seemed to accompany the new 'mood of rebellion';[45] indeed, for
him, the 'fatal weakness of the 'angry young men'' was that they had turned their
'resentment and suspicions into [further] reasons for social apathy rather than means
by which they can escape it'.[46] 'Ranting about an artificial Establishment', Potter
insisted, '[would] not help one bit.'[47] Elsewhere, he railed against 'all those glib
phrases which are slung around with such unctuous abandon by some New Lefters'.[48]
Whilst conceding that he too could occasionally be 'arrogant in [his] ignorance about
the major things we should do', it was, at least in his case, because he was 'still
involved in the realisation of the *possibility* of these things…'[49] The primary
challenge as he saw it was to '[remain] young and hopeful when there is no youth and
precious little hope of remaining patriotic in the decent sense of the word, when our
identity is dwindling away in a steady capitulation before the Coca-Cola onslaught of
the new world on the one hand and a dangerously militant and even criminal nostalgia
for the supposed glories of the past on the other.'[50]

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[43] Brian Walden, 'Potter and Potterism', in *Isis* (May 13th 1959), reprinted in Andrew Billen & Mark Skipworth (eds.), *Oxford Type: The Best of Isis* (Trowbridge 1984), p. 153.
[44] Quoted in *Painting the Clouds with Sunshine*, BBC2, 3 January 2005, tx 21.00.
[45] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, p. 95.
[46] Ibid., p. 141.
[47] Ibid,, p. 130.
[48] Dennis Potter, 'Unknown Territory', in *New Left Review*, No. 7 (January-February 1961), p. 63.
[49] Dennis Potter, 'Changes at the Top', in *Isis* (May 21st 1959), reprinted in Billen et al, *Oxford Type* p. 152.
[50] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, p. 67.

The Glittering Coffin

Peter Hennessy has gone as far as to describe Potter's first book, *The Glittering Coffin* as 'the most striking work that spoke for that young group of left-wingers' which the early New Left had sought to unite under a common political banner.[51] Correspondingly, Thompson's 'Revolution', in 1960 had seized on the book as symptomatic of 'the young socialist generation'.[52] Reviewing the book for the *Guardian* in February 1960, Williams believed that, if nothing else, its heralded the emergence of an 'unusually honest, perceptive and self-conscious' writer:

> He has the wary independence, the despairing sense of mission, of the generation of young Socialists who emerged after Suez and Hungary. Preoccupied by violence, and by its expression in nuclear politics, they passionately oppose both imperialism and Stalinism. Contemptuous of the Labour Right, for its compromises with capitalism, they deplore the lack of contemporary theory on the traditional Left… They argue politics in terms of the whole culture, and are outraged by cultural poverty as their predecessors were by material poverty.[53]

In conclusion, Williams declared that Potter himself could be seen as the most 'encouraging evidence against the kind of formulas with which young men like this have been explained away', and of how 'new men, new ways of thinking and feeling [were now becoming] a growing element in our culture.'[54]

In a rather less charitable assessment, the political commentator Anthony Howard believed he had stumbled upon nothing less than 'the political autobiography of Unlucky Jim' – 'an almost indecent exposure of conscience' by 'a voice crying in the wilderness'.[55] All the author had ultimately succeeded in doing, however, in Howard's view, was to '[make] clear the inadequacy of his own bearings'; indeed, for him, the book had '[epitomised]… the principal weakness of the New Left' itself –

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[51] Peter Hennessy, *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London, 2006), p. 531.
[52] Thompson, 'Revolution', p. 286.
[53] Williams, 'Young Socialist', p. 20.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Anthony Howard, 'The Lost Tribes of the Left', in *The Guardian* (February 8th 1960), p. 8

namely, 'its tendency to conduct every one of its arguments and discussions within its own goldfish bowl:

> Round and round they swim furiously chasing each other's tails; and the unforgivable sin becomes not a failure of feeling or a lack of sympathy but the inability to pick up a reference or understand an allusion…

'Can this', Howard queried, 'really be the foundation on which the *Conviction-Declaration* brigade are seeking to build a new thorough-going left in this country?'[56] Elsewhere, the sociologist Richard Wollheim was similarly unmoved: whilst certain that somewhere amidst the author's unrestrained invective could be found 'a voice of genuine social protest', it was, Wollheim suggested, muffled beneath 'so much rant and rhetoric' that the author had ended up 'virtually drowning in his own words'.[57] Potter's chief folly, however, in Wollheim's view, had been to confuse a '*personal* problem… [with] a cultural one'; in documenting his sense of social and cultural alienation, he had revealed what was 'essentially… a problem about feelings and emotions'.[58] Whilst clearly 'for… [Potter] and those who think like him the future of progressive politics in England, and of the Labour Party in particular', now lay in this ''oblique' approach to politics', it was, Wollheim countered, 'surely… unjustified to call our speculations about society and culture 'political' until we have worked our way back from the more imaginative vision to some suggestion, however fragmentary, of how the vision can be realized' – After all, he concluded, 'what has all this about class and culture to do with politics?'[59]

If anything, Potter's next book did even more to place him within the new 'culturalist' sensibility of the early New Left. *The Changing Forest: Life in the Forest of Dean Today* (1962) stemmed primarily from Potter's belief that what he detected as the breakdown in community life in the Forest of Dean reflected 'in many ways the dilemmas and weaknesses of our society writ small.'[60] At the same time, however, it also reflected what Potter himself admitted was his compulsion to 'wrestle in

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[56] Ibid., p. 8.

[57] Richard Wollheim, 'How It Strikes a Compatriot', in *Partisan Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Spring 1960), p. 353.

[58] Ibid., pp. 357 – 358.

[59] Ibid., p. 362.

[60] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*,

autobiography, for things click too readily into place without the manipulation of 'objectivity' or the passive, necessary, but slightly distasteful business of 'standing apart'.'[61] Correspondingly, like Hoggart's *Uses*, *The Changing Forest* was not afraid 'to labour over the minor or the obvious, or to encase feeling and description within the inconsequential walls of autobiography.'[62] Elsewhere, reviewing Raymond Williams' semi-autobiographical, *Border Country* (1960) for *NLR* in early 1961, Potter claimed he never been 'so moved by a modern novel as I was by this tremendously exciting and beautifully written book.'[63] Williams's depiction of 'the tragic ambiguities in warmth, the piling up of minor irritations, and the almost inexplicable feelings of embarrassment' that develop between a working-class father and his scholarship-boy son had spoken deeply to Potter's own experience of the tensions that can ensue when traversing the 'border country' between distinct social and cultural worlds. At the same time, however, Potter also recognised that social 'displacements' of this sort were now something of a '*universal* experience' and that only 'passionate and personal' statements could offer 'evidence about the changing society we are now so ignorant of'. Indeed, Potter concluded, 'so many people are on the move, crossing so many kinds of borders, that a novel of this kind has a relevance and significance of the true work of art, where talk of 'commitment' is not so much meaningless as entirely superfluous.'[64]

Excepting their autobiographical passages, *The Glittering Coffin* and *The Changing Forest* both read as a somewhat uncertain mélange of Hoggart, Williams and J. B. Priestley. The numerous assaults on the New Left's familiar 'enemies of promise' – 'admass', Croslandite revisionism, the 'Establishment', the Tory Party – seem overdrawn. Whilst later editions would brandish the publisher, Gollancz's, somewhat triumphal claim, 'They've sat up!', it seems highly unlikely the book would have converted many sceptics to the New Left's, or Potter's political vision. Similarly, the passages dealing with the young Foresters' embrace of 'Jukebox Culture', in the later book, perhaps strain a little too much to match the withering critical judgements of Hoggart's *Uses*, and, indeed, have the distinctive ring – half-contemptuous/half-envious – of a young man (still only in his mid-twenties) who has perhaps never felt

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[61] Dennis Potter, *The Changing Forest: Life in the Forest of Dean Today* (London 1962), p. 10.
[62] Ibid., p. *vii*.
[63] Dennis Potter, 'Unknown Territory', in *New Left Review*, No. 7 (January-February 1961), p. 63.
[64] Potter, 'Unknown Territory', p. 64.

capable of experiencing for himself the potent sense of youthful 'belonging' – superficial or otherwise – to which he now directs his 'objective' critical gaze. [65] As Anthony Crosland concluded his review of *The Glittering Coffin*: '[I]f they wish to be effective Mr Potter and his friends' would have to 'abate some of their resentful, almost hysterical anger', as well 'curb their tendency to wild and inaccurate overstatement.'[66] Potter, himself, would later dismiss his early forays into social and political criticism:

> My first two published works… appeared to be heavy with genuine thought, but in reality they were weighed down with political and sociological cant, shuffling through cards marked 'class' or 'England' or 'alienation' with the ardently youthful skill of a tyro fresh out of Oxford who could pronounce upon the condition of his culture and his nation without knowing much of any real significance about himself.[67]

Such, he suggested, was 'not only a common experience', but also 'the way the world constantly diagnoses, and thus mistreats, itself.'[68]

A New-Left Politician?

In this period Potter still felt assured 'that the instinct that I knew I had, and didn't understand… was going to lead me into politics'.[69] Correspondingly, *The Glittering Coffin* had commenced with the author's 'damaging but necessary admission' that he would 'very much like to make a career in politics.'[70] Speaking in 1987, Potter would suggest that were it not for the onset of illness in the early 1960s he 'would probably be leader of the Labour Party by now… in other words, I could have been that kind of sub-criminal.'[71] Elsewhere, in his notoriously vituperative MacTaggart Lecture, delivered to a packed hall of equally exhilarated and exasperated television producers, writers, and executives in Edinburgh in 1993, Potter described how his trajectory

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[65] Potter, *The Changing Forest*, p. 19.
[66] Anthony Crosland, 'Smashing Things', in *The Spectator* (12 February 1960), p. 223.
[67] Potter, 'Some Sort of Preface…', p. 22.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Potter, 'An Interview with Alan Yentob', p. 59.
[70] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, p. 5.
[71] Potter, 'An Interview with Alan Yentob', p. 64.

from working-class 'scholarship boy' to Oxford graduate had briefly prompted a sense of almost inexorable destiny:

> I soon came to know in the Oxford of the fifties that those beautiful spires are not so much dreaming as *calculating*. It took an indecently short time for me to decide to become a politician – and that was only partly because I wanted to open for others the doors which had been opened for me… I sensed … that a laurel-edged path was opening up invitingly at my feet and I knew that it would lead to upholstered media power, or to a padded bench not too far from the mace in Parliament, or a padded cell somewhere not at all dissimilar but even more interesting, wearing a jacket that buttons up at the back.[72]

Despite his contempt for the contemporary Party orthodoxy, Potter, like other new leftists in this period, still considered the Labour Party as 'the only political organisation in Britain which could possibly smash the old set-up in the course of building something more hopeful and inspiring for our future'.[73] Indeed, it 'the Party could shake itself free from some of its fears of a more positively committed Socialism', Potter suggested in 1960, '[and] could once again use the language and vision of its older pioneers, without giving up the desire to legislate for new situations and conditions, then there would be far less talk of undergraduate apathy.'[74] For Potter, it was axiomatic that a 'radical party should splutter with life and polemic, should excite the intellect and emotions and all the while be satisfied only if it disturbs the complacencies and polite hypocrisies that continue to riddle English life and debate.'[75] Indeed, '[t]he great tragedy of Labour's Left', he suggested, and the principal reason for the Party's successive electoral defeats since the start of 1950s, '[had] been its overwhelming, inescapable stupidity, its preoccupation with the old forms, the empty shells, rather than with a living and dynamic application of Socialist ideals.'[76] Correspondingly, '[u]nless and until the so-called 'New Left' of the Party begins to entangle itself more and more with the constituency parties throughout the

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[72] Dennis Potter, 'The James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture, Edinburgh Film Festival, (1993), reprinted in Potter, *Seeing the Blossom*, p. 49.
[73] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, p. 141.
[74] Ibid.,p. 102.
[75] Quoted in Walden, 'Potter and Potterism', p. 156.
[76] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, p. 132.

country, the pattern of the past few years will gradually appear to be inevitable and immutable.'[77]

By 1964, Potter was standing as a Labour candidate in the 1964 General Election for the safe Conservative seat of Hoddesdon, in Hertfordshire. His self-penned election manifesto, *Purpose in Politics*, recapitulated some of the self-reflexive themes of *The Glittering Coffin* and *The Changing Forest*, as well as emphasising his continuing contempt for a supposedly 'democratic' political system which '[creates] an invert and quiescent electorate caught in the inevitable, vicious and diminishing circle, which leaves more and more of the real world beyond its reach, and concentrates again and again in the wranglings about minor issues that… pass for political struggle.'[78]

> All of us carry around a mixture of principle, prejudice and habit which shapes our political decisions. Sometimes indeed, the habit has hardened into a crusty shell that repels any argument, any thesis, any fact which upsets any cherished assumptions […] A Labour Government won't give us all we want. It will inevitably make mistakes… Only con-men promise paradise – only fools pretend that it has already arrived. But I honestly believe that Labour can and will bring back a sense of purpose into our national life…[79]

As Potter would recall in 1994: 'Politics [had] seemed the door, until I actually stood as a candidate. By then, of course, illness had descended and I had a walking stick and… I was drowning actually, drowning, felt that I was…'[80] His inherent shyness and social awkwardness made it difficult for him to connect with his constituents. He was frequently appalled at the prejudice, ignorance and intolerance of those he spoke to. His electoral agent Ron Brewer, would later recall how on at least one occasion Potter had been reduced to vomiting between house calls, an episode Potter would later fictionally reenact in the semi-autobiographical *Vote, Vote, Vote, for Nigel*

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[77] Dennis Potter, 'Postcript: The General Election 1959', in *The Glittering Coffin*, p. *viii*.
[78] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, p. 155.
[79] Dennis Potter, *Purpose in Politics: Dennis Potter's Message to the Electors of East Herts* (London 1964), p. 2.; Potter's election agent, Ron Brewer would later tell Humphrey Carpenter that whilst Potter's title had been 'cribbed from a book by Harold Wilson', it was, nevertheless, 'exquisitely written', and the only one he had deemed worth keeping after 'more than thirty years of electioneering.' (Quoted in Carpenter, *Dennis Potter*, p. 148.)
[80] Potter, 'An Interview with Melvyn Bragg', p. 8.

Barton (1965).[81] In the prequel, *Stand Up Nigel Barton* (1965), the eponymous hero :

'I don't feel that I *belong* anywhere in particular. I despise this place, and I'm no longer equipped to remember where I came from. I despise politics, yet I want things to change. I'm sick of personal tensions, yet I have to exploit them to get any energy, to keep any ambition.'[82]

The Uses of Television

It was whilst reporting on the annual conference of the 'Young Conservatives' for the *Daily Herald* in 1961 that the debilitating symptoms of the psoriatic arthropathy – a rare, hereditary disease which simultaneously attacks both the skin and joints, causing the latter to swell, and the former to shed, crack and bleed – first manifested. Potter would subsequently recall how in the weeks leading up to the conference, he had already become aware of 'a sea change going on within me' – 'My nails were all pitted. I couldn't sleep. I was pale and losing weight.'[83] In subsequent years, Potter would consistently emphasise how the confluence of illness, emotional crisis, and the parallel loss of his highest political aspirations and hopes in the early 1960s, were intimately bound up with the discovery of his creative voice. As he put it to Cook in 1990: '[A]cknowledging I was in desperation was important. That was before I had written any of these plays, and it may well have been the case that, had I not acknowledged that I was *in extremis*, I would never have written at all. I would only have written those two non-fictional, no, those two political books.'[84] 'My condition

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[81] When in *Vote, Vote, Vote for Nigel Barton!* Nigel attempts to deliver a *modish* political exposition to a village-hall audience consisting mainly of insouciant, middle-aged women, the title of his talk is given as 'Origins of the Present Crisis' – the same as that chosen by Perry Anderson's for his landmark 1964 article in the *NLR*, and which elicited Thompson's notorious counterblast, 'The Peculiarities of the English', published in the *Socialist Register* the following year. Whether or not Potter intended the allusion as an ironic comment on what he saw as the similarly affectless pretensions which lay behind certain new-left posturing in this period must remain open to speculation, though, it seems an unlikely coincidence. As it is, in the play, Barton's would-be rallying cry rapidly descends into farce; sensing the '*complete boredom*' of his audience, he disastrously attempts to engage them with humour, only to alienate them further; at last he ends up as the butt of the joke himself by attempting to drink from a glass which had previously contained a bunch of dead flowers.

[82] Dennis Potter, *The Nigel Barton Plays: Stand Up, Nigel Barton, Vote Vote Vote for Nigel Barton* (London, 1967), p. 71.

[83] Quoted in Nicholas Wapshott, 'Dennis Potter: Knowing What Goes On Inside People's Heads – A Times Profile', in *The Times* (April 21st 1980), p, 10.

[84] Quoted in John R. Cook, 'Interview with Dennis Potter, 10 May 1990', transcript available at http://intranet.yorksj.ac.uk/potter/interview9.htm, accessed 16 June 2013 at 2.30p.m.

was genetic, but it felt psychological. I knew that I had lost touch with something, and that the soapbox words were no longer capable of restoring enough of what had been half-unknowingly jettisoned. Different words had to be found, with different functions and a different purpose.'[85]

The personal sense of derailment from what had seemed a predetermined course – or, in Potter's words, 'the crumbling of a whole set of prior ambitions' – might itself be seen as a recurring theme within the wider new-left experience; indeed, from the initial 'exposure' of 1956, through to the denouements of the latter half of the 1970s, the trajectory of British new leftism could be interpreted as a series of virtually unremitting identity crises. In each case, new leftists distinguished themselves as such by their refusal to abandon or forsake their earlier personal or political hopes and commitments, but rather to reformulate or reconstitute them in order to encompass the changed reality. As Potter later described:

> To be at the high tide of belief… whether it's political belief, religious belief, or personal commitment like falling in love, say, it would appear to be both a high moment and 'the answer', in quotes. But inevitably and humanly, as your own body betrays you as you age, so the purity, for example, of a political belief can be fortunately temporized by your own commitments, your own laziness, your own dealing with the rough and tumble of life – which saves people from becoming ideologues, if you like.[86]

When Potter's illness first manifested in the early 1960s he was still only twenty-five. He would later acknowledge how the experience of standing for election had 'put the final screw on [his orthodox political ambitions]. Things went sort of tumbling out of control. I said, 'What do I do now?' I had to do something, but what?'[87] Following a dispiriting stint as television critic on the nominally 'socialist' *Daily Herald* – 'I thought I'd be able to express a sort of socialism on the *Daily Herald* – which [was] a great mistake' – he had spent two years working as a general trainee at the BBC's Lime Grove Studios, under the stewardship of the documentary filmmaker, Denis

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[85] Potter, 'The James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture', p. 50.
[86] Potter, 'An Interview with Alan Yentob', pp. 64 – 65.
[87] Quoted in Alex Ward, 'TV's Tormented Master' in *The New York Times Magazine* (November 13th 1988) p. 87.

Mitchell, though soon tired of what he saw as the corporation's oppressively cautious and politically impartial remit.[88]

From early on, New Left thinkers had taken a keen interest in both the potential uses and abuses of what had, perhaps half-condescendingly, been termed the 'lively medium'.[89] In Britain, television ownership had gone from 344, 000 in 1950 to 10.5 million in 1960.[90] According to Peter Stead, '[b]y the early 1960s television was on its way to becoming the national cinema that cinema itself had failed to be.'[91] New leftists, it was suggested, '[i]nstead of averting [their] minds… should try to analyse what television does badly, and why, and try to make suggestions for its improvement.'[92] As Hoggart saw it, 'the main advantage of television' was that it could 'instantaneously and sharply, offer huge numbers of people a sense of the excitement and variety and, possibly, the depths of knowledge.'[93] As with all forms of 'mass communication', however, Hoggart also detected an essentially 'inhibiting condition' affecting the makers of television, chiefly a 'nervous awareness of the audience.'[94] To grasp this more clearly, Hoggart suggested, '[o]ne need only reflect on the different sense of imaginative freedom one would have in writing a novel (not a would be best-seller but a novel one really wanted to write) or in writing a script for television.'[95]

Graham Fuller has suggested, that had Potter 'written exclusively for the theatre, rather than for a populist medium he would rank as a major literary figure by now.'[96] Similarly, Trevor Griffiths has claimed that had Potter 'worked in theatre, he'd have been the Shaw of our day.'[97] Arguably, however, such claims miss the point. Potter's work is ultimately *inseparable* from the medium he *chose* to work in; indeed, his few forays into mainstream theatre, novels, and later, feature films, are generally

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[88] Quoted in *The Hart Interview*, BBC1, West Region, 14 August 1973, tx 22.15.

[89] Audrey & Kit Coppard, 'The Lively Medium', in *Universities and Left Review*, No. 5 (Autumn 1958), p. 36.

[90] Figures quoted in David Butler & Anne Sloman, *British Political Facts 1900-1979*, 5th Edition (London 1980), p. 462.

[91] Peter Stead, 'A Paradoxical Turning Point: 1959 to 1960', in Sheila Rowbotham & Huw Benyon (eds.), *Looking at Class: Film, Television and the Working Class in Britain* (London 2001), p. 53.

[92] Coppard, 'The Lively Medium', p. 36.

[93] Richard Hoggart, 'The Uses of Television', in *Encounter*, Vo. 14, No. 1 (January, 1960), p. 39.

[94] Ibid., p. 42.

[95] Ibid.

[96] Fuller, *Potter on Potter*, p. *xiv*.

[97] Quoted in *Dennis Potter: A Life in Television*

considered far less effective than his work for television. From early on, he was struck by the potential reach and communicatory power of the new medium: only in television was there the possibility of 'dons and coalminers' sharing in the same experience. Indeed, he never lost his sense of the extraordinary power of that 'thing in the corner of the room, spilling out pictures in your carpet… somehow infinitely more disturbing and potent than any other medium yet.'[98] '[W]ithout even trying, television drama achieves what street theatre sets out to do: the traffic all around it has a strident now-ness, an unthinking, unforced, machine-like contemporaneity that is far removed from the manner in which we expect (and need) to address ourselves to the demands of the older and more prestigious arts.'[99]

As it was, despite the brief, yet exhilarating post-Osborne period, in Potter's mind British theatre had rapidly resumed its place as 'a kind of middle-class privilege, a dying sort of minority thing… Only television [was] classless, multiple…'[100] Similarly, for Stuart Hall, by 1961, despite some 'immense gains', the tentative cultural breakthroughs of the previous few years appeared to have reached 'a dramatic and intellectual […] impasse'.[101] Citing the declining energies of formerly moving spirits such as Osborne and Wesker, as well as the 'rather flat intellectualism', and 'perverse academic card-trumping' of some newer dramatists, Hall detected a more general malaise in the radical cultural movement itself.[102] For him, much of the problem stemmed from British theatre's 'deep roots… in naturalism': 'the desire to recreate working-class life, the preoccupation with humanist values and interest in the attack upon Establishment values through social criticism.'[103] Indeed, what was 'disturbing', for Hall, was the 'utter inability' of British dramatists (or their audiences) 'to engage at the level of ideas'; invariably all that appeared to be on offer was 'either a kind of *pastiche*… or a specially British brand of naturalism.' 'Looking back', however, it was apparent that 'naturalism in any pure sense', had 'never been an adequate form' for '[capturing] the rhythms and situations of *real* life'. Correspondingly, Hall suggested the cultural revolt had 'inevitably' reached 'another

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[98] Quoted in *The Hart Interview*.
[99] Quoted in Joan Bakewell & Nicholas Garnham (eds.), *The New Priesthood: British Television Today* (London 1970), p. 82.
[100] Ibid., p. 84.
[101] Stuart Hall, 'Beyond Naturalism Pure', in Marowitz et al, *The Encore Reader*, p. 216.
[102] Ibid., p. 213; 220.
[103] Ibid., p. 213.

turning point', one in which 'the search for form adequate and organic to theme and temperament' would assume an increasingly central importance; indeed whilst might search would be likely to 'end, either in a bewildering hodge-podge, or a really new mutation', it was, nevertheless, crucial to recognise that '[t]he mood which sustained the early developments [had] certainly broken up', and it was once again beholden on 'dramatists who are capable of telling us, while it is happening, what it is we are thinking and feeling.'[104]

John Caughie has claimed, 'the generation of new recruits who entered television in the 1960s', were motivated by the desire to 'join the anger of Jimmy Porter… with the political engagement of the New Left.'[105] Potter himself later acknowledged: 'I was certainly not alone among my contemporaries in seizing upon television as a process or a platform whereby we could hope to short-circuit the inhibitions, blockages and snobberies of a hierarchical 'print' culture and address our fellow citizens more immediately than had ever before been possible.'[106] Trevor Griffiths, who, like Potter before him, had abandoned a career in left-wing journalism in order to write for the BBC's *Wednesday Play* slot in 1964, recalls how he 'knew from early on that [he] wanted to work in television. Television seemed then, as it still seems now, a massively powerful means of intervening in society's life.'[107] Alan Plater, meanwhile would recall, how '[w]e were all part of that so-called generation that started in the early to mid-sixties when the deal that was offered by television was to go into a studio and fill that space with your imagination.'[108]

British television drama had developed with glacial speed. Just four original plays were produced in the years before World War II, and 'virtually none between 1946 and 1952.'[109] For the following three years BBC television drama lay in the hands of a small coterie of writers working on short-term contracts. It was only with the arrival of commercial television in 1955, that the BBC was shaken out of its complacency. The BBC's 'Drama Experimental Unit', (colloquially known as the Langham Group

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[104] Hall, 'Beyond Naturalism Pure', p. 220.
[105] Caughie, *Television Drama*, p. 65.
[106] Dennis Potter, 'Preface: Follow the Yellow Brick Road', in Robert Muller (ed.), *the Television Dramatist* (London 1973), p. 303.
[107] Quoted in Poole and Wyver, *Powerplays*, p. 1.
[108] Alan Plater, 'Potter Tributes', in *The Guardian*, Arts Section, (June 8th 1994), p. 4.
[109] Laing, 'The Production of Literature', p. 160.

based on the location of the group's headquarters at Langham House, in London) had been established in 1956, in order to monitor the corporation's awareness and approach to questions relating to such issues as 'the validity of present-day story and drama construction, the soundness of old-fashioned theatrical design... cutting for cutting's sake… the possibility that there are [*sic*] more than one level of consciousness at which a programme may be appreciated and found stimulating, and… the intellectual 'West End' attitude of mind – a parochial and 'conditioned' point of view…'[110] By the time the Group was shut down in 1960, it had yielded just three stand-alone productions: *The Torrents of Spring* (1959), *Mario* (1959) and *On the Edge* (1960).

The Popular Arts would later identify the Langham Group as 'one of the few attempts to make a genuine popular art out of new media', concluding that its rapid demise could be explained that its radical remit simply became too 'troublesome' for the BBC.[111] Nevertheless, as Lez Cooke points out, while the Group's work demonstrated a clear commitment to questioning 'the 'theatrical' tradition in BBC drama whereby plays would be staged for television with little regard for their televisual possibilities', they failed to initiate a 'radical departure' from BBC orthodoxy; indeed, Cooke suggests, the rather patrician nature of the Group's actual output – 'stories by Turgenev and Thomas Mann and a wartime 'adventure story'' – should be thought more suggestive of an attempt to 'modernize traditional storytelling'.[112] Indeed, as the *NLR*'s 'evidence' to the Pilkington Committee had observed in 1961:

> The overwhelming majority of [television programmes]… are innocent of invention or skill either in conception or achievement; that even as 'escapism' or 'diversion' many are at best vapid and worst positively harmful; that basically, their providers share a cynical and arrogant attitude toward popular culture. It is only when the concept of popular culture is treated with the respect – and enthusiasm – it deserves, and when the same care, seriousness and awareness of human dignity of the

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[110] Anthony Pelissier, quoted in Lez Cooke, *Troy Kennedy Martin* (Manchester 2007), p. 57.
[111] Hall et al, *The Popular Arts*, p. 60.
[112] Lez Cooke, *Troy Kennedy Martin* (Manchester 2007), p. 58.

audience… spreads through the whole range of production, that we are likely to get good television in this country.[113]

In this context, pioneering drama serials such, *Z Cars*, *Diary of a Young Man*, and *Talking to a Stranger* reflected a wider generational shift with emerging young writers like Tom Clarke, John Hopkins, Alan Plater, John McGrath and Roger Smith setting the tone of 'the new drama at the BBC in the 1960s.'[114] In 'Nats Go Home', his agenda-setting 'First Statement of a New Drama for Television', published in *Encore* in 1964, Troy Kennedy Martin had insisted that 'all [television] drama which owes its form or substance to theatre plays is [now] out'.[115] As it was, most '[t]elevision drama', he claimed, was 'going nowhere fast'. Correspondingly, Kennedy Martin emphasised the need for a new 'working philosophy which contains a new idea of form, with new language, new punctuation and new style.' Crucially, this new language must also be '[applicable] to mass audience viewing.' In order to achieve this, those working in television drama needed to elaborate 'for the first time, an area of theory, experiment and development which TV drama has never had'.[116]

Potter's own aversion to the prevailing 'naturalism' of most television drama was clearly expressed in a 1966 article he wrote for *New Society*: 'BBC drama producers and story editors who think that the studio is insufferable, that the filmed documentary, especially with pop music and a wildtrack of real people being inarticulate about real things, is the norm, and *Up the Junction* the greatest thing since *Hamlet* and Mickey Mouse.' Such 'exposures' of social or political injustice, Potter claimed, were best left as the preserve of 'journalism and the essay and the political polemic'.

It was precisely the *banality* of the circumstances in which most television was received (or *consumed*) – 'you don't even pay your money to take your choice' – that, in Potter's mind, made it such a potentially subversive medium; the television

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[113] Kit Coppard, Paddy Whannel, Raymond Williams & Tony Higgins, 'Which Frame of Mind?: Television Supplement', in *New Left Review*, No. 7 (January-February 1961), p. 35.
[114] Cooke, *Troy Kennedy Martin*, p. 57.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Troy Kennedy Martin, 'Nats Go Home: First Statement of a New Drama for Television', in *Encore*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (March-April 1964), p. 24; See also Dennis Potter, 'Reaction' in *Encore*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (May-June 1964), p. 39.

dramatist, he observed, is obliged to compete against 'a cataract of flushing cisterns, filling kettles, neighbourly gossip or scalding rows.'[117] 'The people who watch it regard it simply as a television programme, like the rest… the entertainment which flows like water from the tap.' Whilst this undoubtedly made the would-be 'serious' playwright's task far more challenging than his counterpart in the theatre, it also offered 'an awesome sort of freedom.' Indeed, for Potter, both 'the exhilaration and purpose of writing television plays' stemmed from 'these two simple facts.' As he later explained in a paper delivered at the 1977 Edinburgh International Television Festival, when used correctly, 'non-naturalism', could be more than just a novelty or stylistic affectation; it could be an act of subversion:

> Most television ends up offering it viewers a means of orientating themselves towards the generally received notions of 'reality'… The best non-naturalist drama, in its very structure, disorientates the viewer smack in the middle of the orientation process which television perpetually uses. It disrupts the patterns that are endemic to television, and upsets or exposes the narrative styles of so many of the other allegedly non-fiction programmes. It shows the frame in the picture when most television is busy showing the picture in the frame.

By 1973, even Potter was conceding how the experience 'of feeding the insatiable machine' over the previous eight years '[had] left their wounds':[118] 'I think I once knew why it was 'important' to write for television but now I am by no means quite so sure.'[119] Whilst he maintained that most of his reasons for choosing the medium were, 'if suitably rephrased – still valid', they had, he now saw, also '[left] out something crucial: the quality of *response*.'[120]

> Bullets on one side and football on the other do not make an auditorium, and the life of a play so doubly boxed can be sucked away in the surrounding flow. Worse, a panel game, a plastic-prairied western, a hard-eyed news bulletin, Wimbledon, a detective melodrama and an original play eventually submerge together into the same *kind* of experience.[121]

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[117] Dennis Potter, 'Cue Teleciné – Put on the Kettle', in *New Society*, (September 22nd 1966), p. 456.
[118] Potter, 'Preface', p. 303.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.

It was this 'landscape of indifference', Potter suggested, that ultimately 'defeat[ed] the pride and passion of the writer.'[122]

History and Sovereignty

During his second term at Oxford, Potter briefly attempted to switch his degree course from Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) to Modern History; writing in support of his application, his tutor, a young Keith Thomas, had stated: 'Mr Potter wishes to read modern history in place of PPE and I strongly recommend that he be allowed to do so… He is a very intelligent person capable of first-class work. If he reads history I think he may well do extremely well at it.'[123] In the event, Potter stuck with PPE, perhaps reluctant to abandon what was then (as it, arguably, still remains today) the favoured route of ambitious young men in Britain harbouring dreams of high political office. Nevertheless, the experience had left him with an enduring sense of 'two distinct and troublesome tendencies of the Politics, Economics and Philosophy school in approaching social and political history:

> [F]irst, in the assumption of a kind of delayed wish fulfilment, seen, broadly, from the stance of Left or Right, and, secondly, in the pernicious facility with which we can observe in retrospect the obvious momentum of development, the parallelism with other times and conditions, and something of the inevitability of what was to happen. Thus, for instance, cocooned in our stale conformism, we are given dull little echoes of the social passions of the past. The Past – how safe![124]

For Potter, the 'genuine' Past was anything but *safe*. Whilst, by the early 1960s, Potter observed, '[it had] become fashionable to make snide remarks about the poverty of historicism', he insisted that 'without a comprehensive account of the glittering decay of our present-day situation – an account that attempts to make an analysis and defence, or, more likely, indictment, of modern capitalism – all out talk of the course of real wages, of pressure groups, theory of value, etc., etc., is talk in a

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[122] Ibid.
[123] Quoted in Carpenter, *Dennis Potter*, p. 60.
[124] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, p. 86.

vacuum.'[125] Potter quoted an observation by the historian, R. J. White, that 'it remains the privilege and the prerogative of the historian to set any given period of history within a wider frame of reference than could possibly have been at the disposal of contemporaries.' For Potter, this 'wider frame of reference' was 'always there, less objectively perhaps, but more urgently.'[126]

For Potter, the past was more than simply a place of nostalgia; it was a site of perpetual political resistance and reconfiguration. As Ron Simon observes, '[Potter's] protagonists are forever trying to reconcile their past actions with their troubled and unsettled present.'[127] Whatever historical 'agency' an individual possessed, was bound up with his or her recognition, and attempted recovery, of their 'sovereign' self:

> Mature balanced individuals have to have regard for what they came from, are, remember, did, wanted, to be able to measure what they are. […] To make any political statement you first of all have to know who and what you are; what shaped your life, what is possible and what isn't. That's not nostalgia. That's a kind of grappling with the past – an ache for it, perhaps, sometimes a contempt for it.[128]

'[T]he historian', he suggested in 1967, 'has every incentive to cut clear through all the familiar evasions and bump hard against the tough old concepts of (pardon the expression) Right and Wrong. If politicians have ceased to be moralists and sociologists cannot afford to be, then at least historians can continue to walk the stony road.'[129] Correspondingly, a decade later, in an article applauding what he saw as History Workshop's 'implicitly political' efforts to '[bring] the boundaries of history closer to those of people's lives', Potter testified to his parallel aversion to 'anaemic or neutered history' – that which attempts to present the past as ''another country' whose struggles are not our own'[130]

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[125] Ibid.

[126] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, p. 85.

[127] Ron Simon, 'The Flow of Memory and Desire', in *The Television of Dennis Potter*, p. 25.

[128] Quoted in Fuller, *Potter on Potter*, pp. 22 – 23.

[129] Dennis Potter, 'The Merciless Retribution of Posterity', in *The Times* (November 18th 1967), p. 21.

[130] Dennis Potter, 'History Plus Sweat, Muscle, and Bone', in *The Guardian* (April 28th 1977), p. 14. On the History Workshop, Potter adds approvingly: 'I was about 11 or 12 when the grammar school made it clear that I would not have to go down the pit for a living. At the same time, by a much more complicated process, the history and culture of families like my own was being made to recede beyond

In Potter's view, '[t]he narrow but fertile strand of our imagination can be used to make the worst sort of make-believe – that of brutish fantasies and a 'celebration' of the indignity of the absurd human animal – or we can use it to help emancipate ourselves to find and hold on to our values as beings innately capable of love, of creation, and growth.' Nevertheless, Potter insisted, commitment to the latter course must by necessity also '[mean] going down into the darkness within us' and 'wrestling with our pain and our anxiety'; indeed, 'the writer who is not addressing himself' in this way, and who scorns 'the search for meaning' and the 'workaday preoccupations and deepest concerns of his fellows' was, for Potter, 'a writer who has corrupted not only himself but his readers. He is one who makes Philistines.'[131] 'What you are waiting for', he suggested, 'is your own voice':

> But your own 'voice', the one you have to delve as deeply as possible into yourself to find and attend to, can too easily be reduced to the subdued babble of second-order memories (nostalgia), received opinions (prejudices), dismay or resentment, or a kind of insistent, hypnogogic whispering which takes up so much space between the bones of your head that you delude yourself into believing that you are actively and seriously *addressing* yourself.[132]

Common Culture and 'Occupying Powers'

His conviction that '[t]he dignity of ordinary people… [was] being swamped by the forces of 'admass' – by the advertising agencies and the popular newspapers, by a state of affairs wherein almost all the mass media are in the control of eager, criminally commercial outside hands.'[133] As early 1960, Potter was claiming that this general 'submission' had become 'so totally engulfing in all its ramifications and processes that it [had] become impossible to move without stumbling on some new

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comprehension and even allegiance. History Workshop exists precisely to restore such losses.' (Potter, 'History Plus…', p. 14.)

[131] Dennis Potter, 'The Philistine Stigma', in *The Guardian* (October 15th 1977), p. 7.

[132] Potter, 'Some Sort of Preface…', p. 22.

[133] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, p. 16.

horror, and hard to comprehend any method by which a more satisfactory common culture [could] be realized.'[134]

> The valid objection to so much of our culture is simply that it takes our hopes from us, and eventually teaches us not to hope at all; there seems hideously, no room for any kind of tomorrow that is not a slicker but more stifling extension of the present. Where our culture is not choked with the endless tentacles of the class structure, it is a feeble patchy thing, all in a mood with the smug precision and insularity of a people content to stand still, to pretend with loud voices in empty bars and to cling hopefully to a sense of 'tradition' which alone can explain away their feelings of inadequacy and their sense of loss.[135]

However, whilst he never lost sight of its mediating effects, he also recognised how popular culture was almost always also 'the inheritor of something else.'[136] As the critic Ron Simon once observed, '[t]hroughout his work [Potter] tried to delineate the integration of mass culture into the private core of self-definition.'[137] He was in his own assessment, committed to showing 'what actually goes on in your head when you perceive your desires through the filter of what is general culture.' 'Popular culture', he observed elsewhere, 'doesn't ask anything specific or say anything specific, but what it does is draw out of you a specific.'[138] As such, 'demotic popular drama', he could also provide a means through which to '[escape] some of the rigidities of the English class system'.[139]

In his very first BBC play, *The Confidence Course* (1965), a character claiming to be the latter-day incarnation of William Hazlitt, assails a would-be 'motivational speaker':

> It is, of course, a gigantic conspiracy. We, as human beings, are all the time and everywhere being mocked and tortured by post-big images of the Ideal family, the

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[134] Ibid., p. 122.
[135] Ibid, p. 117.
[136] Potter, 'An Interview with Melvyn Bragg', p. 19.
[137] Simon, 'The Flow of Memory and Desire', p. 26.
[138] Potter, 'An Interview with Alan Yentob', p. 68.
[139] Quoted in Fuller, *Potter on Potter*, p. 75.

Ideal girl, the Ideal Husband… An arbitrarily defined Perfection assails *us all the time*. Even a pimple on a young girl's face becomes a symbol of sin and depravity.[140]

Potter's polemical interventions were based on his lifelong insistence that '[t]he dignity of ordinary people… [was something] being swamped by the forces of 'admass' – by the advertising agencies and the popular newspapers, by a state of affairs wherein almost all the mass media are in the control of eager, criminally commercial outside hands.'[141] As early as 1960, he was affirming his belief that the general 'submission' had become 'so totally engulfing in all its ramifications and processes that it [had] become impossible to move without stumbling on some new horror, and hard to comprehend any method by which a more satisfactory common culture [could] be realized.'[142] For Potter, the foundation of 'meaningful' social and political consciousness sprang less from an appeal to abstract notions such as *commitment*, *solidarity*, and *community*, but from the awareness of one's own profound ontological isolation and otherness; paradoxically, only by heightening the awareness of this fundamental difference – or 'sovereignty' – could one begin to discover one's *genuine* solidarity with other isolated beings. As Potter himself once observed, 'the human mind, poised on the edge of absurdity and apparent meaninglessness of death, pain and grief, seeks both consolation and enlightenment in myth and metaphor, story and picture, and feels not only cheated but insulted, even deprived when 'Art' responds with sneers, pretensions and elaborate confirmations that life really is a gloomy accident.'[143]

The typical Potter protagonist is invariably a profoundly socially isolated and alienated individual, or 'outsider, struggling to reconcile idealized notions of life, love, morality, or politics, with the triviality or brutality of contemporary experience. Potter's characters suffer humiliation, degradation, social, physical, and psychological incapacity; they are figures seemingly cast out of the 'normal' run of things, yet invariably, with a persistent memory, or *fantasy*, that things had once been different,

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[140] Dennis Potter, *The Confidence Course*, tx BBC television 1965, quoted in Carpenter, *Dennis Potter*, p. 146.
[141] Potter, *The Glittering Coffin*, p. 16.
[142] Ibid., p. 122.
[143] Potter, 'The Philistine Stigma', p. 7.

that is *better*. Indeed, invariably, it is their inability to finally forgo their idealized notions that is the cause of their deepest suffering.

> I don't think people realise how sovereign, how distinct they are. It is the duty of the writer to remind people of their right to assert their individuality; that they are not locked in, in the way they think they are. Being open to another person… particularly another generation; if we have concern… paying attention to another person's sovereignty, you actually emancipate yourself.[144]

His famous use of the popular songs of his childhood, based on their 'uncanny, mind-jangling knack of capturing and concentrating the passing fads and fancies of the day.'[145] Thus the implicitly aspirational dimension in the popular songs of the 1930 and 1940s 'were in a direct line of descent from the Psalms and they were saying no matter how cheap, or banal or syrupy-syncopated they were, they were actually saying the world is *other* than it is. The world is better than it is.'[146] Potter observed that even (or perhaps *especially*) the most crass, trivial, or commercialised examples of mass culture (advertising, tabloid journalism, 'pop' music, soap operas, game shows etc) – relied, to a considerable extent, on their capacity to evoke more fundamental and universal aspects of human experience, humour, love, hope, fear, anger, desire etc, and, thus, were perhaps also capable of transcribing, or conserving, something of that essential human value: 'What matters', he suggested, 'is the emotion that it is supposed to be hinting at, which in its generality allows the consumer, whether it's the popular song or tabloid journalism or any other of those outlets of popular art so-called, to mingle in a way with its day and time… much more immediately sometimes than difficult art can do.'[147] As Glen Creeber notes: 'By recontextualizing both their content and context, and by actually reinventing their production and performance', Potter's work was 'able to transform mass culture into a form of 'folk art', thus restoring a human substance into what may appear, at first glance, to be a 'flat' and 'depthless' commodity.'[148]

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[144] Quoted in John Cunningham, 'Flavour of Decay: John Cunningham Meets Dennis Potter', in *The Guardian* (6 December 1983), p. 11.

[145] Dennis Potter, *Daily Herald*, (August 2nd 1963), quoted in Philip Purser, 'Dennis's Other Hat', in Gras et al, *The Passion of Dennis Potter*, p. 180.

[146] Potter, 'An Interview with Alan Yentob', p. 68.

[147] Potter, 'An Interview with Alan Yentob', p. 68.

[148] Creeber, 'Banality with a Beat', p. 506.

Any popular culture at a given time allow for the expression of certain things, whilst diminishing or suppressing others. Potter's insistence that in the contemporary world the 'frame of orientation' by which modern individuals come to a recognition of themselves was something not only preempted, but, increasingly, *regulated* by what he perpetually invoked as an 'occupying power'.'We have', he observed, 'perfected tremendous electronic techniques with which to dispense something designed to pass the time as painlessly as possible… Yet amid all the distractions at either end of the process we still find ourselves keeping one eye open in case we miss something 'real'.' 'The set is purporting to show us reality… and so it is that most television ends up offering its viewers a means of orientating themselves towards the generally received notions of 'reality' – that is, the way things are, which is more or less the way things *have* to be.'[149]

Potter would eventually quit the BBC in 1979, citing what he saw as the increasingly 'grudging atmosphere' and 'genuine crisis of management' at the corporation.[150] Whilst he would return seven years later with what is now generally considered his masterpiece, the six-part *The Singing Detective* (1986), he never wrote a single play for the corporation again. Towards the end of his life, Potter admitted that were he 'starting out today as a writer who is able to persuade himself… that drama or fiction is one of the last few remaining acres of possible truth-telling' then he very much doubted it would be 'in television as it is now controlled, owned and organized.'[151]

Conclusion

Potter's insistence on the primacy of the struggle for identity, and on the strategies of self-definition which lie behind all political affiliations, paralleled, and to some extent, *presaged*, what has since been recognised as one of the key defining hallmarks of the British 'new left experience' itself. At the same time, through his pioneering television drama, he demonstrated some of the ways in which a technology, that most

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[149] Potter, 'Some Sort of Preface', p. 30.
[150] Quoted in Sean Day-Lewis, 'Playwright Potter Quits the BBC', in *The Daily Telegraph* (May 18th 1979), p. 19.
[151] Potter, 'The James MacTaggart Memorial Lecture', p. 41.

intellectuals, including certain leading New Left thinkers themselves, in the 1950s and 1960s, were apt to see as simply another means of cultural degeneration and social subjugation, might also be employed as a means of radical subversion and transgression, as an 'emancipator' and a 'communicator'. As Peter Ansorge once suggested: 'Just how many writers in the future are likely to approach television drama with the same sense of vocation must be open to question.'[152]

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[152] Peter Ansorge, *From Liverpool to Los Angeles: On Writing for Theatre, Film and Television* (London, 1997), p. 77.

Chapter Four

Imagined Revolutionaries? New Leftism and the Politics and Postures of '1968'

> In 1968 the world seemed to go further left than it had ever gone before and would ever go again. But this left was the New Left: it represented, or turned out to represent, revolution as play. The 'redeemer' class was no longer to be found in the mines and factories; it was to be found in the university libraries and lecture halls… The death throes of the New Left took the form of vanguard terrorism… And its afterlife is anarchistic, opposing itself to the latest mutilation of capital: after imperialism, after fascism, it now faces globalization.

> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (London, 2002), pp. 11 – 12.

> There were people of the Sixties, and then there were the 'sixty-eighters', or, if you wanted to be more assertively Marxist and internationalist about it, *les soixante-huitards*. I was one of those who desired to be a bit more assertively Marxist and internationalist about it.

> Christopher Hitchens, *Hitch-22* (London, 2010), p 85.

> And indeed there was full employment and high wages and although there was still some miserable poverty, there was less of it than there'd ever been before… And, for us, of course, we did particularly well, there were scholarships, and places at the less pretentious Oxbridge colleges, and some of us wrote poetry, and others novels, and some were published, and some not… And we worked on literary magazines or the Third Programme, or we didn't… But you realise there's something missing. The working class is freer than it's ever been. But somewhere in the no-man's land between private affluence and public squalor, somewhere inside the Hoover Automatic or the Mini Cooper, behind the television or underneath the gramophone, those wonderful possessions… you hear a kind of scream. The scream of the possessed. And you realise there's all the difference in the world, between liberty and liberation.

> David Edgar, *Maydays* (London, 1983), pp. 16 – 17.

On 11 June 1968 Dennis Potter attended a party at the South Kensington flat of his then literary agent, Clive Goodwin. Goodwin himself was a ubiquitous figure on the radical London scene throughout the 1960s: actor, journalist, publisher, television producer, and, latterly, widower to the pioneering 'Pop' artist, Pauline Boty, he appeared to many to personify the 'radical chic' glamour of 'high sixties' metropolitan left culture.[1] As a demonstration of his primary commitment to

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[1] See Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, p. 176; and McGrath, 'Clive Goodwin: 1932 – 1977', pp. 234 – 237. As McGrath memorialised Goodwin in 1977: 'In his extraordinary zeal to do, and to learn, he often got involved in ventures which appeared merely flippant, or 'trendy-left', or even just 'trendy'.

'revolutionary socialism', Goodwin had recently thrown his weight behind a new 'non-sectarian' socialist newspaper, *Black Dwarf*, named after Thomas Wooler's early nineteenth-century satirical pamphlet. The gathering at his home that evening was being held partly in order to raise funds for the *Dwarf*'s next edition, and partly to celebrate the arrival into Britain of the German revolutionary student leader, Dany Cohn-Bendit. Joining Potter amongst Goodwin's hastily assembled welcoming committee were such contemporary leftwing luminaries as Tariq Ali, Sheila Rowbotham, Roger Smith, Tony Garnett, Paul Foot, Kenneth Tynan, and Trevor Griffiths.[2]

The latter's 1973 play, *The Party*, would be heavily-based on such a gathering at Goodwin's Cromwell Road flat, a regular fixture for those on the radical intellectual left in London throughout the latter half of the 1960s.[3] In Griffiths' play a number of socialist intellectuals have come together in order to discuss the prospects for revolutionary socialism in Britain in the wake of the recent student uprising at the Sorbonne during the first half of May 1968.[4] Leading the discussion is a fictionalised representative of the contemporary *NLR*, Andrew Ford – a thinly-veiled portrait of the actual *NLR*'s Robin Blackburn.[5] Called upon to elucidate the current 'New-Left

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But his instinct was always sure – 'we', that is the left, needed to be in amongst this lot, somewhere. We must be intimate with the specifics of the present […] He was an ideas man of the left.' (p. 235; p. 237) Jo Cruikshank meanwhile recalls Goodwin as one of those figures who 'ran the underground, the ones that made the happenings… [Already] in their thirties, too old to get really involved, but… getting a buzz out of what they did…' (Quoted in Jonathan Green, *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground 1961 – 1971* (London 1988), p. 92).

[2] From the late 1950s Griffiths was 'progressively involved in both' CND and the New Left, eventually becoming chairman of the Manchester Left Club in 1960. His (unfinished) MA thesis, 'The Meaning of Culture', was an analysis of the shared 'culturalist' themes in the work of Raymond Williams, D. H. Lawrence and F. R Leavis. In subsequent years he would consistently cite both Thompson and Williams as major influences on his thought and work. (See Poole et al, *Powerplays*, pp. 14 – 15.)

[3] John McGrath, for example, would later describe Goodwin's flat as 'the centre of left-wing literary activity' in the 1960s. (John McGrath, *Naked Thoughts That Roam About: Reflections on Theatre* (London 2002), p. 27. Correspondingly, Griffiths recalls meetings 'where sixty or seventy people would cram into a room, and the whole sense, the aching need… to do more, to get it right, to be correct, to read the situation as a first step toward changing it utterly… And with it all, the faint sense of, not silliness exactly, but lack of candour that people offered.' (Quoted in Stanton B. Garner, *Trevor Griffiths: Politics, Drama, History* (Michigan 1999), p. 85.)

[4] Among the other guests in Griffiths' play are a veteran 'Trotskyist', a female 'International Socialist', an 'agit-prop' actress, a fashionable left-wing literary agent, a *Guardian*-columnist, and a television playwright. There is some speculation that Griffiths modeled the latter on Potter, though Griffiths himself would later cite David Mercer as the greater inspiration.

[5] As Griffiths' character directions make clear: 'Andrew Ford, *around thirty, tallish, blond, pale skinned, rather beautiful in the face. He's a lecturer in sociology* [L.S.E]*; sharp, articulate, arrogant beneath the slight charm.*' (Trevor Griffiths, *The Party* [1973], reprinted in Trevor Griffiths, *Plays 1* (London 1996), p. 129).

position', Ford proceeds to offer what he suggests as 'a relatively unexceptional account of the basic Marxian analysis', with 'a few modest revisions of my own'.[6] Commencing with the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, Ford recapitulates how Marx had proffered a vision of history as a teleological movement away from 'human self-alienation' towards 'the real appropriation of human nature, through and for man'; what Marx had called 'Communism', Ford explains, was ultimately nothing more than 'the *definitive* resolution of the antagonism between man and nature, and between man and man.' The bottom-line, for Ford, however, is that '[i]n 1968, European proletariats can no longer be said to be a subversive force inside capitalism'; correspondingly, it is now beholden on Marx's contemporary followers to improvise 'a new model, perhaps a new concept'.[7]

The representation of contemporary left culture in *The Party* reflects what was, by 1968, already being recognised as a massive proliferation of Marxian, and other 'revolutionary' perspectives.[8] Informing much of this expansion was a parallel recognition amongst certain younger new-left intellectuals that British socialism had latterly reached a stage where the need to look beyond their nation's own domestic traditions and cultural referent points, towards a wider world of revolutionary theory and practice, had become increasingly urgent.[9] Indeed, the courting of 'Dany-le-Rouge' by British revolutionary socialists throughout the first fortnight of June 1968 was almost certainly at least partly premised on his being a West German, recently returned from the barricades of 'revolutionary' Paris – as if the very patina of his *europeanness* might somehow serve to have a talismanic effect on the comparatively enervated British political scene. As it was, the overt xenophobia and hysteria demonstrated in some sections of the mainstream British press in the days leading up to his arrival had, to some, already served to expose, or perhaps *reaffirm*, the 'true' face of the indigenous 'bourgeois' enemy. On the very day that Cohn-Bendit's plane

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[6] Griffiths, *The Party*, pp. 134 – 136.
[7] Griffiths, *The Party*, pp. 137 – 138.
[8] See, for example, Victor Kiernan, 'Notes on Marxism in 1968', in *Socialist Register*, Vol. 5 (London 1968), pp. 177 – 194.
[9] See, for example, the editorial, 'On Internationalism', in *NLR* 18 in early 1963: 'The decolonisation of Asia, Africa and Latin America, which is forcing capitalism back upon its homelands of the nineteenth century, has created an immense community of newly or imminently independent nations. Today these three great zones structure the contemporary world. The triangular pattern of the relations between them will shape the next decades… World history is now immediately single and indivisible as never before; but its agents have become multiple.' (Unsigned editorial, 'One Internationalism', in *New Left Review*, No. 18 (January-February 1963), p. 3.)

was due to land at Heathrow airport, the front-page of the *Daily Mirror* had reported how the Conservative M. P. for Haltemprice, Patrick Wall, was planning to question the Home Secretary, James Callaghan, over his 'extraordinary decision to allow into Britain a man whose object is to destroy society.'[10] In the event, Wall and the *Daily Mirror* need not have worried; on 16 June, after only four days, Cohn-Bendit flew back to Germany. A day earlier, Tariq Ali, the twenty-seven year-old *face* of revolutionary politics in Britain, announced that he was, 'giving up – this is my last day in public life. I'm fed up with all this publicity. I just want to fade into the background.'[11] On the 17th, writing in his weekly *Sun* column, Potter offered his own distinctive assessment of the past week and a half's developments, and the impressions they had left him with regarding Britain's 'imminent' *revolutionary* potential:

> Hush, hush little bourgeois baby. No need to wet the bed or shake your rattle in a fury. Sleep tight. Naughty Danny [sic] the Red has flown back to Germany. Mummy and Daddy are quite safe now here in this Land of Nod… Angry? You bet your next prescription charges I'm angry. For I know too well why Danny beat it back to Frankfurt. Boredom, comrades, boredom… I was at the hectic party in a Cromwell Road flat last Tuesday to greet him and other rebellious student leaders. There they all were. A boiling bubbling collection of the militant British Left, draping themselves on the expensive furniture, the light of battle glinting through their fringes.[12]

Whilst Potter acknowledged he had found Cohn-Bendit himself to be a 'stocky, voluble, undogmatic, amusing and optimistic individual – A bringer of hope, a dismantler of prisons' – he had, he suggested, felt increasingly nauseated at the sight of 'well-heeled ex-Presidents of the Oxford Union gibbering about the abolition of money…[and] Public-school voices [emphasising] the need to give arms to your actual workers, and other such horsehair.'[13] Indeed, for Potter, the event had 'soon degenerated into utter farce, with competing vanities, meaningless jargon, ideological confusion, grandiose threats and boutique chatter filling the air like water trickling

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[10] Quoted in Edward Laxton, 'Storm as Red Dany Flies in to London', in *The Daily Mirror* (12 June 1968), p. 1.
[11] Unsigned, 'Tariq Ali Quits – He's 'Fed Up', in *The Daily Mirror* (15 June 1968), p. 1.
[12] Dennis Potter, 'The Night I Met Danny-the-Red', in *The Sun* (17 June 1968), p. 7.
[13] Ibid.

into a cistern.' In short, he concluded, the evening had been little more than, '[a] classic and bitterly comic demonstration of why the Left in this country is more impotent at the moment than it has ever been.'[14]

A Break in the New Left?

By 1962 the New Left appeared to have reached an impasse. As we have seen, the relative optimism of the period 1958 to '61, peaking with the celebrated 'victory' on unilateralism at the Labour Party Conference in May 1960, had been short-lived. Over the same period, the shift towards a more conspicuously 'movementist' agenda had appeared to place considerable strain on the New Left's founding pluralist remit. Under these circumstances, the merger of the *ULR* and *New Reasoner* into the singular *NLR*, in late 1959 – always 'something of a shotgun marriage' – had itself been highly contentious, with representatives from both milieus fearing the loss, or sublimation, of their respective journal's distinctive editorial identities and functions.[15] Nor, in the event, were such fears unjustified. Under Hall's increasingly beleaguered editorship the new journal perpetually struggled to assert a clear identity and programmatic direction of its own.[16] By 1961, with subscriptions in decline, the

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[14] Ibid. In an interview with Philip Purser the following year, Potter elaborated further: 'I listened and felt very lonely and out of it. The same old hates, the same old dogma, the same belief that if only the systems of the world could be changed, everyone would be happy.' Amidst all their chatter, he suggested, the 'militants' had demonstrated '[n]o concern for the sick and the bereft and the lonely and the suffering'; whilst, he still considered himself 'a socialist' he had, he explained, experienced 'a sudden disillusionment with the Left.' (Quoted in Purser, 'Dennis' Other Hat', p. 184)

[15] Palmer, 'Reasoning Rebellion', p. 212.

[16] As Anderson would later note: 'The loss of quality and response in the halting periodical that struggled to survive in 1962-1963, compared with the maturity of *The New Reasoner* or the vitality of *Universities and Left Review*, was painfully evident to all at the time.' (Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, pp. 136 – 137.) Madeleine Davis describes how the early issues had attempted to emulate Edgar Morin and Kostas Axelos's Marxist-humanist journal *Arguments* (1956 – 1962), launched in a similar spirit to the *New Reasoner* in late 1956; Hall perhaps also drew some inspiration from Cornelius Castoriadis's *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (1948 – 1965) (Davis, 'The Origins of the British New Left', p. 48.) For more on the parallels between *Arguments* and the early *NLR*, see Stuart Elden, 'Kostas Axelos and the World of the Arguments Circle', in Julian Bourg (ed.), *After the Deluge: New Perspectives on Postwar French Intellectual and Cultural History of Postwar France* (Lanham, 2004), pp. 125 – 148. As Elden describes: '[*Arguments*] tried very hard to be non-sectarian, including Stalinists, Trotskyists, and even Sartreans among its contributors. But there was a danger that this open Marxism would involve going beyond Marxism, a not-inaccurate description of the tension in the journal as a whole.' (Elden, 'Kostas Axelos and the World of the Arguments Circle', p. 127) As with the *NLR*, these tensions would eventually lead to a distinct sharpening of editorial direction, under Kostas Axelos: 'Morin', Elden tells us, 'recalls his [Axelos's] arriving 'like a meteorite'. Although he did not take over as Chief Editor until 1961… *Arguments* was changed dramatically by his presence. Instead of its previous form as a research bulletin, originally conceived by Morin as a forum for debate and the exchange of ideas, under Axelos it became much more of a standard journal.' (Elden, 'Kostas Axelos and the World of the Arguments Circle', p. 128)

NLR itself 'was teetering on the brink of a fatal crisis.'[17] Increasingly caustic internal memos from Thompson, throughout this period, chastising board members for their poor attendance or lacklustre contributions at editorial meetings, only added to a growing general feeling that the journal, and the New Left itself, had 'ceased to be a genuine collective of like-minded people working together.'[18] Correspondingly, Hall's resignation, later that year, 'under conflicting pressures from the board' served to create 'a vacuum'.[19] It was in this context that, between the latter half of 1962 and the spring of 1963, a new generation of new-leftist intellectuals came to assert an increasingly decisive influence over both the *NLR*'s, and, in the process, British new leftism's subsequent strategic direction and intellectual identity.

At the forefront of the new group was a young Anglo-Irish historian, Perry Anderson, recently graduated from Oxford University and keen to direct his own considerable intellectual (and financial) acumen towards the ailing *NLR*.[20] Joining him, as principal allies, were another recent Oxford graduate, Robin Blackburn, and a slightly older, Scottish political theorist, Tom Nairn, recently returned from a spell at the Scuola Normale in Pisa, and a preliminary grounding in the revolutionary theories of Antonio Gramsci.[21] The former pair had already gained valuable editorial experience together on the Oxford-based journal *New University*, one of the best in what had been a 'flood of university journals' to have emerged out of the burgeoning new-left 'mood' of the

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[17] MacEwen, *The Greening of a Red*, p. 205. Peter Worsley recalls how during the *NLR*'s early years Hall, was effectively obliged to '[live] on the smell of an oil-rag' with the journal only narrowly escaping the same fate as the Partisan coffee-house'. (Peter Worsley, *An Academic Skating On Thin Ice* (Oxford & New York 2008), p. 131.)

[18] MacEwen, *The Greening of a Red*, p. 206. Amongst the strictures Thompson laid at Hall's feet was the claim that the *NLR* was 'too eclectic and dominated by cultural and sociological fashions.' (Quoted in Kenny, *The First New Left*, p. 36)

[19] Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, p. 136. Hall's resignation letter had asserted that the '*NLR* [was] a journal without a *brief* – and therefore impossible to edit and impossible to defend'. (Quoted in Kenny, *The First New Left*, p. 36) Williams, would later admit how 'the pressure on [Hall] was enormous, with constant circulation of internal memoranda about the policy of the magazine.' (Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 365.) Correspondingly, an editorial by an interim editorial group consisting of Samuel, Mervyn Jones, Gabriel Pearson, Dennis Butt and Perry Anderson, announcing Hall's departure the end of 1961, saw fit to acknowledge how Hall '[had] *been* – at times almost single-handed – the New Left.' (Unsigned editorial, 'Notes for Readers', p. 1) For a fuller account of the various death throes of the pre-Anderson *NLR*, see Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?*, pp. 1 – 9.

[20] As Duncan Thompson describes, endowed as he was with ''significant private means'', Anderson 'personally bank-rolled the *Review* through this transitional period.' (Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?*, p. 9.)

[21] This initial triumvirate would soon be joined by some of their former colleagues from the *New University* circle at Oxford, including Alexander Cockburn, Juliet Mitchell, Michael Rustin, Alan Shuttleworth, Gareth Stedman Jones, and Tom Wengraf; as well as a number of émigrés from the Cambridge University Labour Club, most notably Ben Brewster, Anthony Barnett, and James Hinton.

late 1950s.[22] In contrast to the inbuilt frivolity and triviality of most student publications, *New University* was notable for both for its high 'technical proficiency' and 'unexpected level of seriousness'.[23] The journal itself had grown out of a factional dispute within the long-running Oxford undergraduate magazine, *Isis*, after an attempt had been made by an incumbent editor to steer the publication away from what, in the period after 1956, appeared to some as a distinctly 'leftist' political direction. Arriving at St Hilda's College Oxford, in October 1961, Sheila Rowbotham describes how *New University* appeared to represent 'a kind of student wing of the New Left.'[24] Correspondingly, essaying the journal's 'striking and forceful' front covers earlier that same year, Hall discerned, above all 'a deep concern with the interconnections between politics and culture', as well as a growing interest in the 'problems of [university] teaching and the student'.[25] Significantly, in addition to these more overt New Left parallels and preoccupations, Hall also detected 'an arresting concern for revolutionary movements *outside* of Europe'[26]

The 'admirable' intellectual quality and ambition of *New University*'s editors had already come to the attention of the committee of the *NLR* even before it had begun to take stock of its own diminishing fortunes towards the end of 1961.[27] A special edition of the junior publication on the Cuban revolution in 1960, incorporating an extraordinarily confident joint-analysis by Anderson and Blackburn, had been deemed particularly impressive. On the strength of such articles, Anderson had first been invited to write for the *NLR* as early January 1961, with what was, at least at that stage of *NLR* history, a comparatively lengthy two-part survey of Swedish social democracy.[28] Further analyses – on Portuguese Colonialism, Italian Communism, and a collaborative article with Hall on 'The Politics of the Common Market' – soon followed, with Anderson's distinctively wide-ranging and assertive, if somewhat

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[22] Hall, 'Student Journals', p. 50. Gareth Stedman Jones would later recall *New University* as a 'terribly worthy', 'Leavisite New Left paper', stemming from 'this New Left culture going on at the time.' Other notable student journals to emerge in this period include the Cambridge based *Forward*, and Hull University's *Left*, both established in 1960.
[23] Hall, 'Student Journals', p. 50.
[24] Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, p. 63.
[25] Hall, 'Student Journals', p. 51.
[26] Ibid. [emphasis added].
[27] Ibid., p. 50.
[28] See Perry Anderson, 'Sweden: Mr Crosland's Dreamland (Part I), in *New Left Review*, No. 7 (January-February 1961), pp. 4 – 12; & 'Sweden: Study in Social Democracy (Part II), in *New Left Review*, No. 9 (May-June 1961), pp. 34 – 45. In turn, *New University* had published the text of Thompson's rejected BBC lecture, 'The Segregation of Dissent', in May 1961.

aloof, tone and style becoming increasingly apparent.[29] Correspondingly, by late 1962, the proposal put before the ailing editorial board of the *NLR*, that Anderson be appointed the journal's permanent editor, seemed to offer to some the possibility not only of a revivified *NLR*, but, perhaps more importantly, also a bold new direction for the British new leftism itself. As Thompson would later acknowledge: 'We were exhausted: he was intellectually fertile, immensely self-concentrated, decisive. We saw in partnership with him and his colleagues, an opportunity to regenerate the review and to recuperate our own squandered intellectual resources.'[30]

Subsequent efforts by protagonists and historians alike, to denude the editorial transition of some its contentious heat cannot mask the obvious degree of impatience and hostility that accompanied the new team's efforts to disassociate themselves from what they claimed was the journal's hitherto overwhelmingly domestic focus and preoccupations. Indeed, in contrast to the *NLR*'s founding emphasis on British cultural expansion and renewal, the journal's new editors largely appeared to be intent on bypassing domestic cultural considerations altogether: As one disgruntled reader would later complain: '[I]n the first year of the new regime more space was devoted to tenor saxophonists playing in New York than to the British working class in its entirety.'[31] In seeking to explain the divisive and hostile nature of the transition partisans of both sides have tended to place considerable emphasis on the different *generational* backgrounds and experiences of the two ostensible factions. Thus Marion Kozak, for example, points out how '[n]either Anderson, Nairn, [Juliet] Mitchell nor subsequent editors of *NLR* had ever been touched by the agonies of belonging to the Communist Party or its ideology', and thus lacked the in-built suspicion of theoretical abstraction and intellectual purism associated with the New Left's founding agenda.[32] Indeed, in subsequent years, even Anderson seems to have

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[29] See Perry Anderson & Stuart Hall, 'The Politics of the Common Market', in *New Left Review*, No. 10 (July-August 1961), pp. 1 – 14; and Perry Anderson, 'The Debate if the Central Committee of the Italian Communist Party on the 22nd Congress of the CPSU', in *New Left Review*, No. 13 – 14 (January-April 1962); 'Portugal and the End of Ultra-Colonialism – Part I', in *New Left Review*, No. 15 (May- June 1962), pp. 83 – 102; 'Part II', in *New Left Review*, No. 16 (July-August 1962), pp. 88 – 123; 'Part III', in *New Left Review*, No. 17 (Winter 1962), pp. 85 – 114.

[30] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 102.

[31] Widgery, *The Left in Britain*, p. 511. Correspondingly, scanning the journal's tenth anniversary index Widgery found that 'only 9 of 130 articles deal[t] with Britain, 5 fewer than those listed under Cinema.' (David Widgery, ''The Left in Britain': A Reply', in *Socialist Register*, Vol. 14 (London 1977), p. 56.)

[32] Kozak, 'How It All Began', p. 272.

come to accept how, '[i]t was the moment, of course, that clinched it – never did differences of age, however slight, loom so large as in those particular years.' [33]

Given the intensity of the ensuing generational clashes of the 1960s, such considerations can not be underestimated; indeed, as Ellen Meiksins Wood has suggested, seen in this context, the difference between the New Left's founders 'and the next generation of New-Left luminaries', must be understood as 'not just an age difference of, say, twelve to twenty years', but as 'maybe one of the most significant epochal shifts in modern history.' [34] It is important however, that such emphases are not allowed to obscure some of the less obvious factors. As it is Anderson recalls how Thompson, for his part, was always inclined to '[view] talk of generational divisions impatiently', and 'as a way of avoiding difficult arguments.' [35] Indeed, as Thompson himself was still lamenting over a decade later, the 'deeper' distinctions between the two new-left generations '[were] never raised to any theoretical articulation', but were instead 'resolved by an administrative decision.' [36] Thus, whilst Anderson is surely justified in disclaiming Thompson's somewhat hysterical charge of an opportunistic

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[33] Perry Anderson, 'In Memoriam: Edward Thompson' in *Spectrum: From Right to Left in the World of Ideas* (London 2005), p. 177. As Anderson suggests, '[Thompson] seemed not just one, but virtually two generations older, since between us lay… the cohort of Stuart Hall of Raphael Samuel…' Anderson's retrospective, however, also hints at an earlier more cordial, even *intimate*, period of relations between him and Thompson. Amongst other things, he reveals how during the period in which he was completing *The Making of the English Working Class* in late 1962, Thompson required a place to stay in London whilst he paid some final visits to the British Museum. The place he chose was the newly-wedded Anderson's and Juliet Mitchell's Talbot Road flat: 'After hours Edward and I would exchange notes on our day, and fence amiably about history and sociology. 'Do you really think Weber is more important than Bloch?' he would ask me with an air of mischievous puzzlement.' However, it is perhaps worth noting Anderson recollects that, even at this stage, he and Thompson 'had few *political* discussions.' (Anderson, 'In Memoriam', p. 177. [Emphasis added])
[34] Ellen Meiksins Wood, 'The Enlightenment, Postmodernism, and the Post-'New Left'' in Larry Patriquin (ed.), *The Ellen Meiksins Wood Reader* (Leiden/Boston 2012), p. 238.
[35] Anderson, 'In Memoriam: Edward Thompson', p. 177. Although, of course, elsewhere Thompson had already diagnosed what he saw as the crucial 'generational' distinctions that might still serve to undermine the early New Left's project; thus, as well as being 'a difficult generation for the Old Left to understand', the emerging generation were, 'the first in the history of mankind to experience adolescence within a culture where the possibility of human annihilation has become an after-dinner platitude…[It] is a generation which never looked upon the Soviet Union as a weak but heroic Workers' State; but, rather, as the nation of the Great Purges and of Stalingrad… and of Krushchev's [*sic*] Secret Speech: as the vast military and industrial power which repressed the Hungarian rising and threw the first sputniks into space. A generation which learned of Belsen and Hiroshima when still at elementary school; and which formed their impressions of Western Christian conduct from the examples of Kenya and Cyprus, Suez and Algeria. A generation nourished on *1984* [*sic*] and *Animal Farm*, which enters politics at the extreme point of disillusion where the middle-aged begin to get out… They are acutely sensitive to the least falsity or histrionic gesture, the 'party-political' debating point, the tortuous evasions of 'expediency'. They judge with the critical eyes of the Nuclear Age.' (Thompson, 'The New Left', pp. 1 – 2.)
[36] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 103.

'coup', it is equally important that historians seek to elucidate some of what Thompson identified as the 'ulterior differences' between the 'two New Lefts' – 'differences', which would, after all, continue to provide a good deal of the contextual backdrop for radical left debates and discussion in Britain for much of the following two decades.[37]

Arguably, the 'fracture' that came to the fore within British new leftism in the early 1960s should be considered just as indicative of what, even at the time, was being heralded as a much broader shift in Western intellectual culture – chiefly, one away from the hitherto predominant 'literary-humanist' mode British intellectual discourse, towards what were claimed as more epistemologically rigorous, or 'socially-scientific', forms of inquiry and investigation. In this context, Mike Savage has recently documented how the 'meteoric rise' of the journal *New Society* in 1962 heralded a 'unique moment for [British] sociology, testifying to the crystallization of a distinctive interest in gleaning knowledge of social life and social relationships in areas that had hitherto been ignored.'[38] Amongst other things, Savage highlights how within its first year of publication, readership of *New Society* rose as high as 60,000, aided by contributions from 'all the major academic figures' and 'a remarkable 'hall of fame''.[39] Of equal significance for Savage, however, is the roll call of figures who were *not* (at least in the magazine's early years) called upon to contribute – a list which includes most of the leading lights of the early New Left. Indeed, for Savage, the absence of such names as Hall, Hoggart, Thompson and Williams from *New Society*'s early editions should be seen as reflective of an emerging contemporary drive in British intellectual culture to move beyond the 'overt left-wing political framing' that had underpinned social inquiry and analysis in Britain since at least the

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[37] Writing in 1980, Keith Nield acknowledged how the intellectual divisions that emerged between the two New Left's in the early-to-mid 1960s, not least the ensuing clash between Thompson and Anderson themselves over their 'conflicting understandings of how theory might properly be appropriated into substantive historical analysis', was 'symptomatic' of new-left debates that would erupt 'in new forms only ten years later.' (Keith Nield, 'A Symptomatic Dispute? Notes on the Relation between Marxian Theory and Historical Practice in Britain' in *Social Research*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Autumn 1980), p. 479.)

[38] Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford 2010), p. 113.

[39] Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940*, pp. 113 – 114. Included amongst the *New Society*'s regular contributors Savage cites such notable figures as Enoch Powell, T. H. Marshall, John Madge, Barbara Wootton, John Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, C. C. Harris, Peter Willmott, Michael Young, Jack Goody, Raymond Leach, and Peter Worsley.

late 1930s, in favour of an approach that was 'rational, neutral, and objective – and thereby better able to be politically efficacious.'[40]

As suggested in the previous chapter, early new leftists were themselves far from insensate to this shift; indeed, conceivably, through their own innovative social and cultural investigations they had done much to help bring it about.[41] Moreover, as Hall would later observe, even before British new leftism's so-called 'theoretical turn' in the mid-1960s, figures like Hoggart, Thompson, and, above all, Williams, had already begun to '[shift] the whole ground of debate from a literary-moral to an anthropological definition of culture,' with the former now increasingly coming to be seen as just *one* amongst many available modes, or 'idioms', through which human 'meanings and definitions' come to be 'constructed and historically transformed'.[42] Correspondingly, in a lecture delivered at the University of London in April 1961, Williams had expressed his profound personal hope that the 1960s would provide the backdrop for a sustained period of theoretical reassessment and advancement, through which the undeniable 'breakthroughs' of the initial phase of new-left activity may be decisively capitalised upon: 'The point we have reached', Williams suggested, 'is one where we have to go into theory, we have to go into abstraction. We can be glad that the other work has been done. We hope it will go on being done, and that people will go on making the incidental criticism which has been popular. But if we are serious we must now move beyond that.'[43]

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[40] Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain Since 1940*, p. 114.

[41] Thus, Nick Bentley has recently emphasised the diverse methodological approaches (including sociological, ethnographic, cultural, parodic, literary criticism, and fiction) through which new leftists in the 1950s had sought to represent the rapidly changing social and cultural developments taking place around them. As it was, writing in 1961, the critic John Mander had characterised the New-Left 'emphasis' as 'strongly sociological', and reflective of 'a new desire to discover the facts about what used to be called the 'condition of England'. The new emphasis is wary of involvement in parliamentary and party politics; and it is largely non-philosophical and non-literary.' (Mander, *The Writer and Commitment*, p. 11.) Correspondingly, Rolf Lindner observes how Hall's pioneering analyses of youth cultures in the late 1950s, '[prefigured] the cultural principle' that Paul Willis would later '[open] out ethnographically in his Social Science Research Council (SSRC) project, 'The Transition from School to Work', as well as setting 'something of a blue print for the research programme' later implemented by the BCCCS during Hall's period of directorship (1968 –79).

[42] Hall, 'Introduction', p. 6.

[43] Raymond Williams, 'Communications and Community', Williams' text for the William F. Harvey Memorial Lecture, delivered at Bedford College, University of London on April 8th 1961, reprinted in Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope: Culture, Democracy, Socialism* (London 1989), p. 21.

However, as committed as they may have remained to finding 'new ways of seeing, and new ways of speaking together', new leftists had also expressed considerable concern about what they saw as the tendency of some of the newly emergent analytical and theoretical approaches in the social sciences, and elsewhere, to *usurp*, rather than *augment*, more established, or 'traditional', 'modes' of transcribing and apprehending human experience.[44] Thus, writing in 1960, Alasdair MacIntyre had observed that what most 'sociologists and political theorists have to say today often seems as devoid of immediate political significance as the study of butterflies or Buddhism'.[45] Elsewhere, Raphael Samuel inveighed against the aridity of sociological language, and its commensurate inability to evoke either the complexity or diversity of human motivation: in the representative sociological account, Samuel suggested, 'there are no substantive emotions left at all: neither generosity nor selfishness, altruism nor self-seeking, kindness nor cruelty, but only their pallid reflections which flicker in the universal mirror of status.' [46]

Such attitudes were underpinned by what many early new leftists still saw as the 'unique' power of literature to both apprehend and convey aspects of human experience that other disciplines either ignored or were simply incapable of acknowledging.[47] As Hall suggested in 1959, the best 'prose work offers an *imitation* of the world, an attempt to dramatise the values we already know, and by dramatisation to make us know them in ways which it is impossible to know by other means…'[48] 'I value literature', asserted Hoggart in 1963, 'because of the way – the peculiar way – in which it explores, re-creates and seeks for the meanings in human

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[44] Such concerns were, of course, not confined to new leftists: Writing in the *Spectator*, in April 1962, Kingsley Amis detected 'an innocence and unworldliness about most sociological writing'; indeed, 'with the possible exception of public relations' Amis could think of no other 'field of cultural activity in which the expert seems to start off with so much less information than the ordinary citizen.' It is only right to point out that the book which had prompted Amis' comments was none other than *Communications* (1962), Raymond Williams' contribution to Penguin's *Britain in the Sixties* series. (Kingsley Amis, 'Martians Bearing Bursaries', in *The Spectator* (April 26th 1962),p. 31.)

[45] MacIntyre, 'Breaking the Chains of Reason', p. 199.

[46] Samuel, 'Dr Abrams and the End of Politics', p. 3.

[47] Correspondingly, Dworkin points out how until at least the early 1960s, 'British Marxist thought was steeped in English literary culture.' (Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, p. 43). Elsewhere, Eric Hobsbawm recalls how most of the Marxist historians of his generation had begun 'more often than not, as young intellectuals who moved to historical analysis from, or with, a passion for literature'. (Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 97.) As it was, as late as 1960, the literary critic of *Marxism Today*, Arnold Kettle, could assert how '[t]he articulate intellectual Left in Britain today is almost exclusively 'literary' rather than scientific', showing a 'general preference for living in a world of 'ideas' and 'values' rather than practical action.' (Kettle, 'How New is the 'New Left'?', p. 303.)

[48] Hall, 'Commitment Dilemma', p. 69.

experience'.[49] For Thompson, meanwhile, literature and the arts represented nothing less than 'the supreme expression of man's imagination and moral consciousness, as media, through which men struggle to apprehend reality, order their responses, change their own attitudes and therefore change themselves'.[50]

Whatever the merits of the intellectual programme inaugurated by the Andersonian *NLR* in the period following 1963, there can be little doubt that it signified profound contraction and repudiation of the original New Left's multifaceted political, cultural and intellectual project. Indeed, arguably, in concentrating their efforts exclusively towards the latter, those who have since come to be associated with the so-called 'second New Left' abandoned the principles of new leftism altogether.

Keeping the Agenda Alive

What then, if anything, remained of these principles after 1963? Writing in the early 1970s Thompson would recall how following the dissolution of the founding *NLR* committee in the early 1960s, he and his fellow new leftists had '[withdrawn] from a signal-house of defined commitments and enter[ed] the wilderness of individual collective enterprise.'[51] As it is, Scott Hamilton's recent study has served to suggest just how deeply the disintegration of the early New Left would continue to affect Thompson for the remainder of the 1960s. In a similar vein, Hall would later describe how, 'for a time' following the movement's collapse, Raphael Samuel was 'clearly in serious emotional and intellectual difficulties, rescued only from a prolonged nervous breakdown by Christopher Hill's timely recommendation of him to a tutorship at the trade-union Ruskin College.'[52] On the same April afternoon that Anderson had dissolved the *NLR*'s original editorial board, a number of its now defunct committee members, including John Saville, Lawrence Daly, Edward Thompson, and Ralph Miliband, had convened at the latter's garden for a lunch, during which the idea of 'not an 'alternative' but 'another' socialist journal to which they could give their

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[49] Richard Hoggart, 'Why I Value Literature' in *Times Educational Supplement* (1963), reprinted in Richard Hoggart, *Speaking to Each Other: About Literature Vol. 2* (London 1970), p. 11.
[50] Thompson, 'Socialist Humanism', p. 122.
[51] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 102.
[52] Hall, 'Raphael Samuel', p. 121.

energies' was conceived. The new publication, it was agreed, would consciously strive to recover 'the tradition of [the] *New Reasoner* partnership, lost in the *NLR*'.[53]

If, however, this means it is accurate to imagine, as some historians have, the *Socialist Register* as a direct continuation or resurgence of an original 'new leftist' agenda is highly questionable: Madeleine Davis, for example, has recently characterised the *Register* as 'a journal which in many ways can be regarded as a direct successor to the project of the *New Reasoner*.'[54] Elsewhere, Colin Leys argues that '[o]f all the surviving initiatives of the original 'New Left' in Britain the *Register* has probably stayed closest to its original aims, linking critical analysis with left activism'.[55] Such claims must be thought based on a highly attenuated reading of what those 'original' New-Left aims might have been. Indeed, though once cited by Thompson himself as 'the last survivor in the direct line of continuity from the Old New Left', it would be surely be misleading to assume that, in 1965, the annual *Register* simply picked up where the *New Reasoner* had left off in late 1959. As Miliband himself would later acknowledge, at no point did he or Saville 'devote any time to the discussion of the ideological and political direction of the prospective publication.' Moreover, Marion Kozak recalls Thompson pronounced 'fears', and 'differences over editorial policy'; indeed, 'his decision not to join the Board', Kozak recalls, 'stemmed partly from the fact that he and Miliband had 'a different attitude…' Correspondingly, Thompson, would later express his regret that the *Register* failed to incorporate 'all the tendencies which co-existed fruitfully in the older movement.'[56] To this extent, a rather more convincing candidate for the role of carrier, or incubator, of the New Left project in the years immediately following Anderson's takeover is the privately-funded, Yorkshire-based literary magazine *Views*. Though tiny in circulation, between 1963 and 1966, the magazine served as kind of iron-lung for those new leftists – Thompson, Hilton, Saville – rendered most breathless by the struggles and disappointments of the initial seven years.

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[53] Marion Kozak, 'How It All Began', p. 270.
[54] Davis, 'The *New Reasoner* and the Early New Left', p. 48
[55] Colin Leys, ''Honest Socialists': John Saville and the *Socialist Register*', in Howell et al, *John Saville*, p. 51
[56] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 10.

As we have seen, despite their profound disillusion with the contemporary Labour Party early new leftists had always remained 'deeply aware of the overriding strength of the labourist tradition.'[57] Indeed, to this extent, 'the fate of socialism in Britain was [recognised as] inextricably bound up with the fate and fortunes of Labour.'[58] Whilst, to some extent, the Labour Party represented the very form of bureaucratic stasis, empty constitutionalism and philistinism that new leftism sought to transcend, it was also that which had driven through the National Health Service and the Welfare State and that had historically represented the interests of the working class. Correspondingly, for the New Left's founders, it was taken 'as a matter of course' that the 'majority of those actively associated with the New Left… [would also] be active members of the Labour Party and trade union movement.'[59]

As it was, Peter Sedgwick would later reflect how a 'Left consensus' on 'Welfare and Equality' – melding Croslandite revisionism, redistributive Fabian theory, Richard Titmuss and Peter Townsend, as well as early New Left perspectives on the roots of inequality – held until roughly 1965. Indeed, for Sedgwick, the 'general tendency of writing', in this period, 'reflected the aspirations of a Labour intelligentsia who expected some serious results to emerge from their critique once [Harold] Wilson's team got in office.'[60] Correspondingly, Wilson's victory in the 1964 general election had conceivably appeared to many new leftists to offer the possibility of a genuine revivification of the parliamentary route. Even the *NLR* had mustered an uncharacteristic note of approval, with Anderson himself writing in praise of 'Wilsonism's' multifaceted creative response, which has made the Labour Party into the dynamic left-wing of European Social-Democracy.'[61] Indeed, if nothing else, Anderson observed, '[p]erhaps for the first time in its history,' Labour appeared to be presenting 'a coherent analysis of British society today, a long-term assessment of its future, and an aggressive political strategy based on both'; correspondingly, he concluded, '[t]he chances of the Left', were, at last 'tangible' again. [62]

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[57] Saville, *Memoirs from the Left*, pp. 117 – 118.
[58] Hall, 'Life and Times', p. 192.
[59] Thompson, 'The New Left', p. 16.
[60] Sedgwick, 'Varieties of Socialist Thought', p. 399.
[61] Perry Anderson, 'Critique of Wilsonism', in *New Left Review*, No. 27 (September-October 1964), p. 4. See also, the unsigned editorial, 'Divide and Conquer', in *New Left Review*, No. 28 (November-December 1964), pp. 1 – 3.
[62] Anderson, 'Critique of Wilsonism', p. 4.

Within six months, of Wilson being in office, however, much of this initial optimism had receded. Writing in the newly established *Socialist Register* in 1967, John Saville observed

> How it comes about that those who win elections with socialist phrases on their lips – and most are not conscious hypocrites – then proceed to administer a capitalist society, which they have previously denounced, in as efficient a way as possible, is one of the central ironies of modern British history. For socialists, who have struggled to put their leaders in power, it is tragedy.[63]

In this context, the *May Day Manifesto* initiative of 1967-69 was an effort on behalf of a 'revived' New Left to provide a genuinely workable 'socialist alternative' to the retrograde, technocratic and superficial programme of 'modernisation' pursued by the Wilson government. As the opening pages of the document explained: '[W]e are faced with something alien and thwarting: a manipulative politics, often openly aggressive and cynical, which has taken our meanings and changed them, taken our causes and used them; which seems our creation, but now stands against us, as the agent of the priorities of money and power.'[64] At the Manifesto's official launch at Caxton Hall, London, on May 1st 1967, Williams had suggested that even before 1964 it had become apparent that Labour had turned itself into an electioneering political machine, allied to management capitalism. 'Mr Williams said the revived New Left was determined to alter the political weather and update the Socialist case. Contracts would be established with trade union groups, and Left clubs and Communists in Britain and Europe.'[65]

For Williams, the 'sustained discussions' and 'well-attended meetings' that accompanied the final stages of the *Manifesto's* production in late 1967, felt 'like a regrouping again of the early New Left board'.[66] Indeed, if nothing else, it signalled 'a

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[63] John Savile, 'Labourism and the Labour Government', *Socialist Register*, Vol. 4 (London, 1967), p.45.
[64] Stuart Hall, E. P. Thompson & Raymond Williams, *The May Day Manifesto* (London, 1967), p. 1.
[65] Richard Bourne, 'New Left to Fight Labour 'Capitalism'', in *The Guardian* (April 29th 1967), p. 3
[66] Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 373.

very conscious reconciliation' between him and Thompson.[67] Joining them and Hall amongst the original document's sixty-six signatories were such early New Left stalwarts as Michael Barratt-Brown, George Clark, Royden Harrison, Mervyn Jones, Ralph Miliband, Michael Rustin, Raphael Samuel, John Saville, Peter Sedgwick, and Peter Worsley, as well as some representatives from the younger generation such as Robin Blackburn, Terry Eagleton and Alan Shuttleworth (though significantly, the *Manifesto* received no contemporary coverage – positive, or otherwise – in the *NLR* itself). Appearing to make the idea of a revival explicit, the modish 1960s cover design on the original *Manifesto* even incorporated the term 'New Left' in bold black letters.

Nevertheless, as Williams would subsequently point out in his introduction to the extended 1968 Penguin edition, the *Manifesto* was intended less as 'a revival of 'the New Left', considered as some specific organization which it has never really been, but a development of what we are content to call the New Left emphasis'.[68] This distinction should not be overlooked. As the former secretary of the *Manifesto* Committee in London, Michael Rustin, would later describe: 'Where the earlier new left had announced the various new issues of affluent politics, one by one (youth, communications, nuclear armaments, the quality of work, planning, community, popular and committed arts, for example), and had catalysed or helped their subsequent developments as fields of political work, the *Manifesto* tried to synthesize these into a unified programme'.[69] Central to this emphasis was an extended diagnosis of the contemporary malaise in Labour Party thinking, and of its present leadership's perpetual capitulation to 'the new capitalist system'. The *Manifesto*, Williams reaffirmed in 1968, was aimed at the 'thousands who share our general analysis and who stand in our situation.'[70]

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[67] Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 373. As Perry Anderson would later reveal, Williams had been profoundly affected by Thompson's 'temperate', but 'wounding', two-part review of *The Long Revolution* in 1961. Particularly upsetting to Williams was Thompson's implication that the Cambridge don 'had become half absorbed, in manner and preoccupation, by the ruling-class academy'; as Anderson points out, 'it is not surprising that a signalman's son took this amiss.' (Anderson, 'In Memoriam', p. 179.)

[68] Williams et al, *May Day Manifesto*, p. 44.

[69] Michael Rustin, 'The New Left and the Present Crisis', in *New Left Review*, No. 121 (May-June 1980), p. 69.

[70] Hall et al, *The May Day Manifesto*, p. 44.

One of Williams' students at Cambridge, the playwright David Hare, would later recall his bemusement at his tutor's 'decision in the winter of 1967 to bury himself away in his room with a team of curly-headed academics who arrived from London in Citroens to edit a project entitled *The May Day Manifesto*.'[71] Indeed, to Hare and his 'despairing chums', the *Manifesto*, emerging, as it did, like 'a sort of Sergeant Pepper album of the organized left', offered little more than a 'fathomless source of satirical energy.'[72] Worse still, it seemed to represent a repudiation of Williams' own deepest revolutionary ideas and insights: chiefly through his reading of Williams' *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*, Hare had come to understand 'that an 'idea' so called is not anything manufactured by an intelligentsia behind closed doors, but is more truly the expression of a widespread feeling which has arisen among many people at a particular time, and which then needs to be articulated'; why, then, Hare queried, 'did a manifesto of political ideas have to be set out in precisely that excruciating jargon' that had already 'alienated so many potential supporters from an interest in socialism?'[73] In a marginally more forgiving assessment, Sheila Rowbotham reflects how '[i]n more sober times the May Day Manifesto initiative' might well have provided 'the basis for a [genuine] regrouping of the left'; indeed, according to Rowbotham '[i]ts failure to strike a chord in 1968', had less 'to do with the prescience of its proposals' than with the 'political disposition' of the younger socialist generation (herself included) to whom it was primarily addressed: 'We were full of our revolutionary toughness even before the May events… and the Manifesto didn't have the frenzied intensity… It looked too respectable, too safe.'[74]

Thompson himself would later recall the 'accession of pessimism', that followed the failure of the *Manifesto* during the final months of 1969.[75] For Williams, too, '[t]he failure of the effort at a real regroupement of the left in the *Manifesto*' was to have an enduring personal and political legacy: 'After that', he would suggest in 1978, 'the one thing I was determined not to take part in was a re-play of the sixties.'[76]

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[71] David Hare, 'Cycles of Hope: A Memoir of Raymond Williams', reprinted in David Hare, *Writing Left-Handed* (London 1991), p. 8.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream*, p. 175.
[75] Thompson, 'Preface' to *The Poverty of Theory*, p. *i*.
[76] Williams, *Politics and Letters*, p. 376.

New Leftism and 1968

Apprehending the representative 'structures of feeling', and commensurate mental universe, that lay behind the political and cultural new leftism associated with '1968' is a precarious historiographical task. As the former 'radical student', and later Labour politician, Kim Howells once observed: 'It's something that left-wingers elsewhere, who were perhaps much more politically radical than I, who understood the whole thing in its historical context, missed completely.'[77] As it is, the contemporary writings dealing with '1968' in Eric Hobsbawm's 1973 collection, *Revolutionaries*, are, arguably, amongst the least assured of the historian's entire career – indeed, as Hobsbawm himself would later admit he, like most of his generation, 'misunderstood the historic significance of the 1960s'.[78] Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise from the outset that the experience of '1968' was not, as has since often been suggested, confined exclusively to those below the age of thirty: as Peter Buckman observed at the time, 'the vast majority of those under thirty cannot agree on any vision, and would be scared shitless if the revolution happened tomorrow.'[79] As it was, many of the so-called 'permissive' and 'countercultural' imperatives now generally attributed to the so-called 'babyboomer generation' were embraced just as enthusiastically by individuals in their forties and fifties as they were by teenagers and twenty-somethings. Middle-aged figures, and older, such as John Mortimer, David Mercer, Joan Littlewood, George Melly, Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan should be considered just as important in setting the distinctive cultural tones and styles of the 1960s as any of their younger counterparts. As the forty-year old Mercer, observed in the first edition of *Black Dwarf* in June 1968: 'The conclusions drawn by the young go far beyond the (as some would have it) tedious symptoms of the perennial generational conflict…. Post-war capitalism… has produced a society which must appear morally revolting to many people whether they understand its mechanisms or not.'[80]

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[77] Quoted in Fraser, *1968*, p. 277.

[78] Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 253. As Hobsbawm recalls: 'For middle-aged leftwingers like me, May 1968 and indeed the 1960s as a whole were both enormously welcome and enormously puzzling. We seemed to be using the same vocabulary [as younger revolutionaries], but we did not appear to speak the same language.' (Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 249.)

[79] Peter Buckman, 'A Deafening of Profits', in *Oz*, No. 33 (February 1971), p. 29.

[80] Mercer, 'Respectable Man', p. 2.

With that said, however, any attempt to apprehend the radical politics of this period whilst evading the significance of generation altogether is unlikely to get very far. As Tony Judt once observed, 'the transcendent importance contemporaries attached to their own times – and their own selves – was one of the special features of the age.'[81] For Tom Nairn writing at the time, it was 'a simple fact – scarcely of 'history' even, almost of chronology – that the present generation of young people aged 20 – 25 in Western Europe and North America' occupied 'a unique position in the development of civilization'.[82] As Nairn conceived it, they were, 'the products of a conjunction of circumstances without any real parallel in the past'; they had 'inherited the earth, *en masse*, as no other generation in history [had] ever done'; they stood 'at the end of history'; it was, thus, at least for Nairn, axiomatic that 'this ultimate, utopic generation…' should be 'by far the most revolutionary one the system has ever produced'.[83]

As Holger Nehring has suggested, 'in Britain… [1968] has not obtained quite the iconic status of the long 1960s in other countries'.[84] Correspondingly, in an article tracing the global scale of 'new-left' activism in this period, Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey discerns meaningful contemporary developments in France, Germany and the United States whilst overlooking any such comparable developments in Britain.[85] Similarly, in his attempt to pin-down the elusive *Spirit of '68*, Gerd-Rainer Horn finds little to detain him in Britain, concluding that it was not until 'the late 1970s… [that] the high tide of the waves engendered by 1968 elsewhere, finally caused a ripple along Albion's shore.'[86] As it is, even those who bemoan the general failure of modern British historians to take domestic New Left developments more seriously have tended to assume that, '1968 was *not* a defining moment for the British New Left as it was in the United States, France, or Germany.'[87]

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[81] Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London 2010), p. 390.
[82] Nairn, 'Why It Happened', p.115.
[83] Ibid., p. 118.
[84] Holger Nehring, 'Great Britain', in Klimke et al (eds.), *1968 in Europe*, p. 125.
[85] See Ingrid Gilcher-Holtey, 'May 1968 in France: The Rise and Fall of a New Social Movement', in Carole Fink, Phillip Gassert and Detlef Junker (eds.), *1968: The World Transformed* (Cambridge 1998), pp. 253 – 277.
[86] Gerd Rainer-Horn, *The Spirit of '68: Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956 – 1976* (Oxford 2007), p. 235.
[87] Davis, 'The Origins of the British New Left', p. 45.

Such lacunae can only be assumed to stem from highly partial, or, at least, narrowly *institutional*, readings of the British 'new left experience' – though, arguably, even if one chooses to view New-Left history through its strictly intellectual or organisational manifestations, it is hard to see how '1968' can be interpreted as anything other than a crucial, if not a 'defining moment'. As will be seen in the following chapter, the personal and political ramifications of '1968' would continue to reverberate for new leftists well into the late 1970s, if not beyond.

Alastair Reid has recently made the claim that 'much of what was called 'New Left'', during this period was, in reality, 'a product of people holding old-left ideas but emphasising direct action or opting for some aspects of counter-cultural lifestyles.'[88] Whilst such a characterisation perhaps help us to understand the somewhat sudden recrudescence of more markedly 'old-left' preoccupations and practices at the turn of the 1970s, it does little to evoke the anarchic irreverence, iconoclasm and *humour* that informed so much of the cultural and political radicalism of this period. As it was, responding to some of his 'left-wing critics' in 1970, the author of *The Limits of Protest*, Peter Buckman, observed how it was 'a pity that none' had seemed to grasp his book's essential point that was 'going on in protest' now, '[bore] less and less resemblance to a class struggle', but was above all 'a struggle for CONSCIOUSNESS'.[89]

Writing in 1967, the former Chairman of the London New Left Club, George Clark suggested that '[a]n 'anarchist' strand' had been 'built into the basic emotional formation of the New Left, [even] before *organised* anarchism reappeared on the scene.'[90] Correspondingly, Raphael Samuel would later reflect how contemporary discussions in the journal *Anarchy*, not only prefigured 'much of the cultural revolution of the 1960s', but also '[ran] in easy tandem with a larger New Left.'[91] As early as 1960, the editors of the recently established *NLR* identified the urgency for new leftists to generate a '*consciousness* that the constituency worker fighting to get the Conference Floor, and the duffle-coated jazz-fan on the Aldermaston March

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[88] Reid, 'The Dialectics of Liberation', p. 280.
[89] Peter Buckman, 'Flogging Critics', in *Oz*, No. 26 (January 1970), p. 32.
[90] Clark, 'The Condition of England Question', p. 212.
[91] Raphael Samuel, 'Then and Now: A Re-evaluation of the New Left', in Archer et al, *Out of Apathy*, p. 148.

[were] both *running* in the same direction'; indeed, at that stage, it was 'the mutual hostility and suspicion on both sides of this fence' which was seen to most hinder the ''break-back' of New Left ideas into politics'.[92] Thus, whilst by the late 1960s some new leftists were still clearly looking upon their 'hippy', underground and 'love generation' counterparts with a mixture of suspicion and contempt, others were still seeking to recognise – and cultivate – an essential parity of purpose.[93] As Juliet Mitchell would later recall: '[A]t their worst', 'hippies', 'freaks', and 'flower children' were seen as 'more-or-less joyful symptoms of a decaying order; at their best', however, it was hoped that they might also become 'the agents or instigators of a new one.'[94] Elsewhere, writing in response to the student insurrection at the Sorbonne in May 1968, Nairn concluded how '[a]ll the evidence… suggests strongly that without a powerful dose of anarchic sentiment and ideas, a revolution of this sort and in these conditions is very unlikely to get far.'[95] 'We must greet and welcome anarchy', agreed Peter Sedgwick later the same year: 'It is not the sword of revolution, only its herald. But a herald performs a genuine service.'[96]

Elsewhere Charles Marowitz complained that too much of the contemporary '[p]olitical fervour' seemed to stem from 'personal preoccupations that erroneously imply the existence of wider political beliefs.'[97] Whilst such 'political naïveté… may be adorable in the abstract', it was, Marowitz suggested, 'infuriating to those who battle the same enemies with conviction and a thorough understanding of who they are up against.'[98] Indeed, in Marowitz's view, most of 'London's hippies' were to be

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[92] Unsigned, 'Left Clubs', p. 72.

[93] For example, Christopher Hitchens would later recall deliberately keeping his hair short so as to avoid any association with the 'narcissistic', and 'nonsensical' sixties counterculture. Hitchens, who had been recruited into the Trotskyist 'International Socialists' by Peter Sedgwick in 1967 would also claim how one of the features which attracted him to 'IS, as it called itself, was that it was inoculated against certain Sixties fads in advance… 'Without Illusions'… was a signature phrase of the Group. In the coming years, I was to do many things, and hold many positions, 'without illusions'.' (Christopher Hitchens, 'In the Bright Autumn of My Senescence', in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January 6th 1994), p. 17. See also Peter Sedgwick's highly critical contemporary articles on what he saw as the pernicious thinking and influence of, respectively, R. D. Laing and Herbert Marcuse: 'R. D. Laing: Self, Symptom and Society', in *Salmagundi*, No. 16 (Spring 1971), pp. 5 – 37; and 'Natural Science and Human Theory: A Critique of Herbert Marcuse', in *Socialist Register*, Vol. 3 (London 1966), pp. 163 – 192.

[94] Mitchell, *Women's Estate*, p. 27.

[95] Nairn, 'Why It Happened', p. 136.

[96] Peter Sedgwick, 'Anarchy and Organisation', in *International Socialism*, No. 34 (Autumn, 1968), p. 36.

[97] Charles Marowitz, 'Groovy for the Drop-outs', in *The Guardian* (June 24th 1967), p. 6.

[98] Ibid.

regarded not just as ''drop outs' (people who have rejected any form of social or political activism) but as 'cop-outs' – people who equate mind-erasure with the dissolution of social problems.'[99] At the same time, however, representatives of the 'counter-culture' and 'underground' berated their 'political' and 'revolutionary' counterparts, for attempting to 'harness and direct' the 'prevailing mood of frustration widespread among a wide cross-section of [young people]' – a mood they could 'not fully understand' and were thus clearly 'not capable of handling.'[100]

Elsewhere, assessing the evolutionary trajectory of the notorious 'underground' magazine, *Oz*, in 1972, the writer Auberon Waugh, observed how much of the magazine's distinctive character and appeal over the previous five years stemmed from the 'schizophrenic' tension at its heart 'between the politicos and the freaks, between the killers and the kissers, the dynamic and pathetic tradition of underground culture'; indeed, for Waugh, whilst in the ensuing struggle his own sympathies had always been 'heavily on the side of the freaks', it was the 'seriousness' and 'self-importance' of the 'revolutionaries' that had served to 'add a little salt to the kisses and sucks, a little opium or whatever to the hash', and *Oz* would not have been 'so stimulating or tasty without them.'[101]

Like the *NLR*, the editors of *Black Dwarf* maintained that '[t]he British left… [remained] the most *parochial*, *defensive* and divided of any in a major Capitalist nation'; correspondingly, 'the task any revolutionary journal… [must be] to turn the left into one that is *internationalist*, *aggressive* and *united*.' Correspondingly, in addition to its main commitment to revolutionary socialism, *Black Dwarf* also strove to bring such issues as homelessness, rent increases, squatter's rights, corporate behaviour, police brutality, racism and education to a wider socialist audience. A 1969 advertisement for the *NLR* suggested, that whilst *Black Dwarf* 'can keep you up-to-the-minute with news from the world revolutionary front, *NLR* can provide…

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[99] Ibid.
[100] John Hopkins, 'An Open Letter to Tariq Ali', in *International Times*, No. 29 (April 19th – May 2nd 1968), p. 7; and Schradan Giftgas, 'Up Your Alley, Tariq', in *Oz*, No. 40 (February 1972), p. 25.
[101] Auberon Waugh, 'To Have Reached 5 is to Have Failed in Life', in *Oz*, No. 40 (February 1972), p. 17.

depth analyses of particular countries, movements, struggles; contemporary texts of Marxist theory; debate on the strategy and tactics of the revolutionary movement.'[102]

The extent to which the radical generation of the 1960s achieved their revolutionary ambitions, has been the subject of intense cultural and historiographical debate for nearly half a century: thus, for every overly-confident assertion that 'the generation of the sixties was quite genuinely something new' – '[overturning] a value system that had stood in place for more than a century', and '[determining] the direction of the Western world in the years that followed', can invariably also be found an equally unequivocal insistence that 'the counter-culture [in Britain] was simply irrelevant in terms of mass politics', and that anyone who claims otherwise be considered guilty of 'wild romanticism'.[103] It is important, however, that historians resist the temptations of what, as early as 1972, no less a figure than Michel Foucault had already identified as the 'familiar dualistic interpretation that has laid claim to the events of those years.'[104]

Other contemporaries would point to what they saw as a distinct 'change of mood' beginning 'around 1965': not least, 'the gloomy earnestness of the 'protest' mentality' was 'displaced by a new 'tough' frivolity and creative lunacy'; suddenly, the debate was 'no longer between Right Wing/Left Wing, but rather between the oppressions of the external world and the desire for internal liberation, between activist commitment to the continuing cultural struggle and dropping out of a cultural milieu that [would not] allow it.'[105] The 'real breakdown', Widgery suggested in an article for the *New Statesman* in 1967, '[had] nothing to do with LSD or geraniums', but came about because 'grown-up's language contains values which are no longer accepted or even

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[102] 'Advertisement' in *Black Dwarf*, Vol. 14, No. 24 (October 26th – November 15th 1969), p. 12.

[103] Jonathon Green, *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counterculture* (London 1998), p. *x*.; Nick Tiratsoo, 'Labour and its Critics: The Case of the May Day Manifesto Group', in Richard Coopey, Steven Fielding & Nick Tiratsoo (eds.), *The Wilson Governments 1964 – 1970* (London 1993), p. 175.

[104] Michel Foucault, 'Preface', in Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (New York, 1977), p. *xiii*.

[105] Peter Stansill & David Zane Mairowitz (eds.), *BAMN: Outlaw Manifestos and Ephemera 1965 – 70* (Harmondsworth 1971), p. 13. Some of this shift can be detected in the period's representative music: compare, for example, the exhilarating, yet generally thematically conservative material on the early 'LPs' of The Beatles, The Kinks, The Rolling Stones and The Who in the first half of the decade, with the infinitely more subversive, ambitious and experimental work of 'albums' like *Rubber Soul* (1965), *Face to Face* (1966), *Aftermath* (1966), and *The Who Sell Out* (1967). The incorporation of marijuana, and other stimulants into most of these musicians' 'creative process' around this period is not, on its own, enough to explain this remarkable, and *rapid*, forward leap.

relevant to young people.'[106] Indeed, 'your generation's radical culture', Widgery observed, 'has become quite flaccid… 'Where are they now, the nuclear protestors and radicals, the iconoclasts and rebels? In the cabinet and the posh Sundays, every one?'[107]

As *The May Day Manifesto* initiative invoked earlier might suggest, this was not wholly the case. Nevertheless, Widgery's charge touches upon another central aspect of sixties radicalism: the sense that young people had a premium on radicalism. As Widgery himself suggested elsewhere, 'then the gang breaks up, the people in the same class as you have babies, before you know it you are in the launderette complaining about Jimmy Young and your husband's tastes for huge plates of carbohydrates.' For the teenage Widgery the Aldermaton marches constituted nothing less than 'a student movement before its time, a mobile sit-in or marching pop festival; in its midst could be found the first embers of the hashish underground and premature members of the Love Generation.'[108]

Smashing 'The System'

According to Alasdair MacIntyre one of the key features of the 1950s' New Left had stemmed from its founders' insistence that 'if you are going to be effective, you are going to have to oppose not this or that feature of the system but the system itself.'[109] 'Seen internally', Nairn suggested, 'the neo-capitalist equilibrium can appear as absolute, therefore, as the foundation of indefinite future progress'; with a little effort however, it soon became apparent that Western societies were now also 'trapped, perhaps irrevocably, in the very conditions which have rescued them from the worst evils of history.'[110] Indeed, '[b]ourgeois politics with its soporific consensus', merely served to create the illusion of a healthy democratic process.[111]

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[106] David Widgery, 'Against Grown-Up Power', in *New Statesman* (August, 1967), reprinted in David Widgery, *Preserving Disorder: Selected Essays 1968 – 88* (London, 1989), p. 5.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Widgery, *The British Left*, p. 104
[109] MacIntyre, 'The 'New Left'', p. 99.
[110] Nairn, 'Why It Happened', p. 116.
[111] Cockburn, 'Introduction', p. 9.

Power, in modern capitalist societies, it was noted, was 'not uniquely concentrated in one institution' such as parliament or the army, but was rather, 'embedded in the fabric of *all* social relations', to the extent 'that *every* factory, office, church, college, housing estate, hospital, prison, school, trade union or party both partakes of and contributes to the power of the dominant class.'[112] The primary function of popular culture, meanwhile, was simply 'to conceal from the masses the fact that the material preconditions of social liberation' were already at hand.[113]

Meanwhile, the ongoing 'stagnation of advanced capitalism' continued to be 'veiled by a dizzying succession of spectacles.'[114] Correspondingly, much of the political and counter-cultural radicalism associated with 1968 was concerned with puncturing that 'veil', exposing the 'manufactured illusions' of mass culture, and 'ripping the mask' of 'repressive tolerance' in order to reveal 'the true visage of authority'.[115]

Sixty-eighters perceived themselves as caught in nothing less than all-out war of attrition, against a prevailing 'bourgeois' enemy 'increasingly centralised and well-organised, which employs increasingly subtle and far-reaching methods of control, [and] which every day invades more and more aspects of people's lives and thoughts…'[116] 'Despite the exciting bits', Widgery observed in 1969, 'the pleasures of life tend to be capitalist cabbage water: The T.V., radio and odd film… It all comes from the Great Muzak machine of capitalism and its designed to get you to like the present set up and view any other social arrangement as 'idealistic' or 'impossible' or just not worth the bother.' [117] 'Faced with such a total assault', it was hardly surprising if some came to believe that 'only a similarly *total* reply… [could] be effective'.[118]

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[112] Alexander Cockburn, 'Introduction', in Alexander Cockburn & Robin Blackburn (eds.), *Student Power: Problems, Diagnosis, Action* (London, 1969), p. 17.
[113] Ibid., p. 8.
[114] Ibid., p. 9.
[115] Ibid., p. 8.
[116] Unsigned, 'Happiness Is?', p. 6.
[117] David Widgery, 'Cabbage Water Cock-Up', in *Black Dwarf* Vol. 14, No. 17 (May 16th 1969), p. 4.
[118] Nairn, 'Why It Happened', p. 125.

Most of *One-Dimensional Man*, Sedgwick suggested, was simply 'a severe disappointment' – 'grandiose journalism of doom… nebulous, bitty and generally unempirical.'[119] Beneath the bluster, however, Sedgwick also detected what he saw as a more serious, if also, to his mind, *pernicious* argument. Marcuse had 'suggested that the very language of the modern intellect', was now 'evolving to 'close the universe of discourse'' itself.[120] Indeed, in Marcuse's view, modern Western disc 'no concept beyond the existent order of domination could be either formulated or understood.'[121]

To less apocalyptic chroniclers of the contemporary dialectic, such as Sedgwick, and later Marshall Berman, such ideas were nothing less than 'a travesty of the [very] nineteenth-century modern tradition in whose orbit Marcuse claimed to move'; indeed, as Berman would later suggest, 'to invoke' the work of Marx and Hegel, whilst 'rejecting their vision of history as restless activity, dynamic contradiction, dialectical struggle and progress', was 'to retain little but their names.'[122] Conceivably, however, for a generation 'raised on *Animal Farm* and *1984*[sic]', books like *One-Dimensional Man*, and Laing's *The Divided Self,* tapped into what was already, by the mid-1960s, a deep vein of pessimism regarding the possibilities of anyone affecting meaningful social or political change within post-war Western societies.

Some of this pessimism is reflected in Don Levy's remarkable 1967 film, *Herostratus*. The film had first been conceived during Levy's time as a post-graduate at Cambridge in the late 1950s, with commercial media and television advertising – 'in the prevailing spirit of the late-1950's New Left' – emerging as 'the characteristic villain of the piece.'[123] Levy himself would later describe *Herostratus* as a 'documentary' about the 'tragedy of the ego' – as well as a 'hard and intense reassessment of our own integrity', and a '[search] for wholeness… having scarred the truth of ourselves'.

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[119] Peter Sedgwick, 'Natural Science and Human Theory: A Critique of Herbert Marcuse', in *Socialist Register*, Vol. 3 (London, 1966), p. 166.
[120] Ibid.,p. 165.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 29.
[123] Henry K. Miller, 'Don Levy and the Slade School', in BFI Sleeve Notes, *Herostratus* (London, 2011), p. 13.

Amongst other things, the film commits itself to documenting how, in modern capitalist societies radical and subversive acts are either nullified, or 'exposed' as essentially reactionary or egocentric acts devoid of any wider meaning. As the cynical advertising mogul, Farson, at one point taunts the lead character: 'Your sincerity – your freedom – where's it got you? Nowhere!' 'It isn't just society that's wrong. It's you! And you've got to face it.' Reviewing the film for *The Times* in 1967, the critic John Russell Taylor saluted what he recognised as both Levy's and the film's '[tremendous] ambition', adding how it was 'difficult to imagine anything farther from the norm in British film production… It is brilliant, and it is faintly repellent, but repellent because it means to shake us up…' Upon its release on DVD in 2011, some contemporary critics commented on what they saw as the overblown sixties' worthiness of the film, suggesting how its principal value for viewer's today was as a period piece. Half a century after it was made, however, the unvarnished and unrelenting psychic pain at the heart of *Herostratus* still has the power to shock. Indeed, as both a diagnosis and a demonstration of what had – by the early 1960s – become of a certain kind of post-war social and political idealism, the film has few parallels.

Student Power

A student population of roughly 100, 000 at the beginning of the 1960s had doubled by 1967/8.[124] As Anderson would later recall, '[t]his sociological expansion of the basis for a British intelligentsia coincided with institutional changes that gave more outlets for radical intervention.'[125] Anderson's 'Components of the National Culture' (1968) quoted, approvingly, Louis Althusser's observation that, 'the true fortress of class influence' in modern capitalist societies – as well as 'the number one strategic point of the action of the dominant class' – was 'the very knowledge students receive from their teachers'. Correspondingly, before any meaningful revolutionary movement could emerge in Britain, Anderson suggested, 'a scaling of this fortress [would be] necessary'. In this context, the emergence of the 'radical student movement' in the mid-1960s appeared to some new leftists to 'promise a renewal of

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[124] Nehring cites 82,000 students in 1954 – '55, 118, 000 in 1962 – '63, and 235, 000 by 1970 – '71. (Nehring, 'Great Britain', p. 125.)
[125] Anderson, 'A Culture in Contraflow', p. 195.

revolutionary politics as well as the arrival of a new social force.'[126] Students, it was noted, '[had] already seen that the traditional 'democratic processes' result only in the perpetuation of a system they reject politically, morally and socially.'[127] Moreover as Nina Fishman, would later recall with its turn to 'student power' in the 1960s 'the New Left actually became fashionable.'[128]

C. Wright Mills' 'Letter to the New Left' had already urged his Marxist counterparts in Britain to abandon the idea of the industrial working class as the main agents of revolutionary transformation, as early as 1960. '[W]hat I do not quite understand about some New-Left writers', Mills had commented, 'is why they cling so mightily to 'the working class' of the advanced capitalist societies as *the* historic agency, or even as the most important agency, in the face of the really impressive historical evidence that now stands against this expectation.' [129] Nevertheless, for Thompson, whilst socialist intellectuals might indeed be thought to have 'crucial role' to play both in 'precipitating' new forms of potentially radical consciousness, and in helping to 'initiate much broader processes', they could 'only defeat and isolate themselves if they [were to] assume the hubris of 'main agents', since the kind of socialism we want is one which is impossible without the participation of the whole people at every level.'[130]

'A significant function of many colleges and universities' was 'to generate the themes of ideology within the social system as a whole'.[131] Indeed, to some, observers the very purpose of higher education itself to provide a 'training ground for agents of the consumer society.'[132] 'In the universities, despite the odd outburst and TV militant, students are left in their common rooms like so many heated goldfish to talk about *The Hobbit*, milk bottles, North Sea Gas and anything that not 'intellectual',' observed Widgery in 1969: 'The student's say over his personal freedom and union autonomy is intermittent; their voice in syllabus planning and government of their

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[126] Cockburn, 'Introduction', p. 7.
[127] David Mercer, 'Respectable Man', in *Black Dwarf*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (June 1st 1968), p. 2.
[128] Quoted in Green, *Days in the Life*, p. 56.
[129] C. Wright Mills, 'Letter to the New Left', in *New Left Review*, No. 5 (September-October 1960), p. 22.
[130] Thompson, 'Revolution Again!', p. 29.
[131] Cockburn, 'Introduction', p. 17.
[132] Juliet Mitchell, *Woman's Estate* (London 1971), p. 25.

university is unheard.' Correspondingly, writing to *Oz* magazine from his rooms at Exeter College, Oxford, the twenty-one year old John Gray (at this stage firmly identifying with the revolutionary left) offered his impressions of the university as 'a prison, if an open one, and the college are its cells; only their inmates stay of their own accord, and the locks and bars that kill the freedom in them are only partly physical…'[133] This 'voluntary servitude and abnegation of human possibilities', Gray concluded, was directly analogous to 'the typical form of contemporary bureaucratic capitalist society.'[134]

A primary objective behind much sixties' student radicalism was 'to bring higher education out of the ivory towers and make it available to all.'[135] 'Only by making the struggle for the campus his first concern', concluded an *NLR* discussion panel in 1967, would 'the student ever be able to make the acquisition of critical knowledge a right of education.'[136] In time, however, this developed to expressed a deeper ambition 'to hold a militant radical and critical examination' into the 'structure' of the education system itself, in order 'to bring forward a programme of far-reaching proposals for the reform of the content of courses, the democratization of the college academic structure and for the recognition of basic student rights.'[137] Correspondingly, at places such as Hornsey, the focus of student discussions quickly moved beyond 'local' issues, towards 'an analysis of art education nationally, and the relationship between artists, designers and society.' Such trends would be paralleled in other contemporary student occupations such as Essex, Hull, and the LSE.

Like their forebears in the 1950s, the sixties' new leftists saw themselves as part of a generation that had 'rejected established modes of political action' – their 'struggle' was not against this or that policy or practice, but 'against the social system as a whole.'[138] Correspondingly, the primary objective was not to form an alternative

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[133] John N. Gray, 'Oxford', in *Oz*, No. 25 (December, 1969), p. 37.
[134] Gray, 'Oxford', p. 37.
[135] Tom Nairn quoted in, *The Hornsey Affair* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 30.
[136] Gareth Stedman Jones, Anthony Barnett, & Tom Wengraf, 'Student Power: What is to be Done?', in *New Left Review*, No. 43 (May-June 1967), p. 9.
[137] Nairn, *The Hornsey Affair*, p. 30.
[138] Cockburn, 'Introduction', p. 7.

political party or movement but 'to create an extra-parliamentary opposition' that would, in time, 'reconquer power from below.'[139]

After May

It might be claimed that in any genuinely *revolutionary* epoch there comes a point when the would-be 'vanguard' begins to sense that the historical initiative may finally have passed to them; the 'revolution', hitherto only conceived in embryo, begins to attain a glimmer of inevitability; the 'old' world is dying, and the 'new' world is finally beginning to reveal itself. In such moments, theories, ideas, hopes and expectations all assume a renewed confidence and momentum. Arguably, such a moment came in May 1968. As Perry Anderson acknowledged a few months later: 'The May Revolution in France was foreseen by nobody: It burst upon the world without warning… For years the Left in Europe has been writing 'Letters from Afar', attempting analysis, expressing solidarity, discussing strategy. Now the struggle has suddenly arrived at home.'[140] The coming period, Nairn predicted, would 'exceed every vision, break every obstacle, and realize the dreams of maturity, of which we are as yet scarcely conscious'; it would 'represent a turning-point second to none in the development of human history.'[141] 'Every existing theory becomes inadequate before it. Every sacred truth… shown up as partial, in the face of it'.[142] After May, it was 'no longer a question of whether the revolution can be achieved and whether the majority wants it, but when and in what form it will take place.'[143] Even the irredeemably 'bourgeois' London *Observer* appeared to recognise how the actions of the Paris students had ensured that '[n]othing will ever be quite the same again':[144]

> For they have crystallised longstanding, nagging doubts not only about France but about the nature of government in all advanced industrial societies – capitalist and communist alike. Something clearly is stirring under the surface of our inherited

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[139] Ibid.

[140] Perry Anderson, 'Introduction to Special Issue on France May 1968', in *New Left Review*, No. 52 (November – December 1968), p. 1.

[141] Nairn, 'Why It Happened', pp. 155 –156.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Hervé Bourges, 'Foreword', in Hervé Bourges (ed.), *The Student Revolt: The Activists Speak* (London 1968), p. 11.

[144] As the *Black Dwarf* claimed in 1969: '*The Observer* prides itself on being a paper of liberal inclination and accurate reporting. This is a load of bullshit.' (Unsigned, 'Dwarf Diary', in *Black Dwarf* Vol. 13, No, 12 (28 February, 1969), p. 12).

assumptions and conventional wisdom about the nature of our societies… Domestically, it is clear that we are moving into a new and fluid situation, where we are going to have to experiment with our institutions: both politicians and university teachers will have to wrestle with the problem of what happens when there is no longer an automatic respect for authority and when every concession leads to further demands.[145]

Correspondingly, Thompson would later recall how, 'for a year or two, intoxicated by [the events in Paris]… cohorts of leftist students imagined that, by some act of occupation of a few administrators' offices, they could announce in the heart of repressive capitalist society a 'red base' which would bring an instant voluntaristic proletarian revolution looming out of the streets.'[146] To this extent, John McGrath, who had crossed the channel in May 1968 in order to deliver funds raised by *Black Dwarf* to the Sorbonne students would later admit to being somewhat 'disappointed at the rather pathetic response in England to the earth-shattering events in Paris'; indeed, compared to what he had experienced in France, 'our own revolution' McGrath lamented, seemed to be 'restricted to a few tame speeches in the [London School of Economics] and a series of opportunistic follow-up meetings manipulated by the Socialist Labour League.'[147]

Even the fifty-one year old Eric Hobsbawm could not resist being caught up in the burgeoning revolutionary atmosphere: 'What has happened in France is marvellous and enchanting… For us old members of the fan-club, it proves that Paris still has star quality… something happened which might quite well have turned into a revolution.' '[O]nly the sense of impotence', he concluded, was now holding back revolutionaries in Britain 'from acting like men and not zombies.' [148] 'The familiar tactics of left-reformists typified by a refusal to take sides in public and a reliance on parliamentary cretinism', observed the *Black Dwarf* in October 1968, had at last 'been swept away by militants throughout the country.' Correspondingly, the editorial continued, '*Black Dwarf* believes that all left-wing groups should get together and set up a joint

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[145] Unsigned editorial, 'What The Observer Thinks – Authority: France & Britain', in *The Observer* (May 26th 1968), p. 10.
[146] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 99.
[147] McGrath, *Naked Thoughts That Roam About*, p. 30.
[148] Eric Hobsbawm, 'Theory Turned Sideways', in *Black Dwarf*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (June 1st 1968), pp. 4 – 5.

coordinating committee called the Extra Parliamentary Opposition.' There were, however, to be no illusions: '[W]e shall begin to see the real, ugly face of the ruling class in this country. It will be as brutal as any other ruling class. There should be no doubt about that and militants should prepare for this.' [149]

As early as February 1969 an editorial in *Black Dwarf* was lamenting what its unidentified author saw as the rapid recrudescence of a more 'frivolous and fundamentally anti-political ambience', in the aftermath of May 1968: '[P]olitical differences', the editorial noted, 'have ceased to be political and have become fetishised'; meanwhile, '[t]he central political problems of the British left… the crisis of the Labour Party, the future of the left, the significance of the student movement, the possible forms of contact between student and workers, the relation between the proletarian and national liberation movements, racism' (though, notably, not at this stage, *feminism*) continued to go unarticulated.[150] Indeed, 'left' groups and individuals, now seemed to '[devoting] more energy to spirited and ill-informed attacks on all other tendencies than on trying to apply Marxism creatively to the British and international crises we now face.' Conversely, another *Dwarf* editorial by Ali the following June – marking the magazine's first birthday – observed that whilst much of 'the strength of the *Dwarf*' over the previous year had derived from its essentially 'non-sectarian attitude', it was now this very reluctance on the part of the magazine's editors to '[affiliate] to any organisation' that was coming to constitute its 'main weakness'.[151] Indeed, in Ali's view, the failure to adopt a coherent revolutionary theory and strategy had made the *Dwarf*'s first year an 'exceptionally difficult period'; whilst 'the *ideas* of large numbers of young activists' may have been '*revolutionised*', the revolution itself seemed further and further way.[152] Correspondingly, Ali suggested, the *Dwarf* would now be seeking to initiate 'a regroupement of the revolutionary left in Britain', if one which 'would obviously exclude those who saw parliamentary activity as the only way to a socialist Britain.' The new function of the magazine, he suggested, would be to serve 'as the organ of a revolutionary party, however, embryonic it may be' – 'For too long', he concluded, 'left politics in this country have been tied to a dull and narrow insularity.'

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[149] Unsigned editorial, 'The Street is Our Medium' in *Black Dwarf*, No. (27 October 1968), p. 2.
[150] Unsigned, 'Left Debate', in *Black Dwarf*, Vol. 13, No,. 12 (February 28th 1969), p. 7.
[151] Tariq Ali, 'For a Revolutionary Journal', in *Black Dwarf*, Vol. 14, No. 18 (June 1st, 1969), p. 2.
[152] Ibid.

Within a year Ali, and five others, had left the *Dwarf* in order to establish what was proposed to be a new 'more politically consistent and coherent paper'.[153] 'The political split on the Dwarf editorial board', Ali explained in the first edition of *Red Mole* in March 1970, had occurred primarily 'because it was impossible to achieve unity in action… We had to make up our minds who we were talking to and what we wanted to say to them, most important of all what we wanted them to do.'[154] What had latterly become clear, he suggested, was that is was 'no longer sufficient to provide an abstract revolutionary culture as the *Dwarf* [had sometimes attempted]'; indeed, '[t]he crying need of the left', now was 'to get organised.'[155]

Contemporary issues of 'underground' magazines, like *Oz* and *IT* also reveal a distinct hardening of tone, as well as, a growing accommodation with the increasingly militant 'revolutionary anarchism' of groups such as The Angry Brigade – a far cry from what some still recalled as their 'flower power' foundations. 'What has happened to the country since the marvellous summer of love of 1967?' asked Tuli Kupferberg in April 1970: 'Everything has become polarized.'[156] In today's world, no-one is an innocent, no-one a neutral', quoted an *IT* editorial towards the end of 1970: 'A man is either with the oppressed or he is with the oppressors. He who takes no interest in politics gives his blessing to the prevailing order – that of the ruling classes and the exploiting forces.'[157]

 'The day of the revolution has come and gone', observed a letter in *Black Dwarf* in January 1969, 'and ordinary British housewives can now heave a sigh of relief, and put the kettle on for a nice cup of tea…'; the heady events of the previous year, it continued, were now '[j]ust something else for historians and self-appointed experts to analyse and explain for the benefit of the mass produced conformists of the future… Where do we go from here? Anybody know?'[158]

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[153] Unsigned editorial, 'Where to Begin', in *Red Mole*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (March 17th, 1970), p. 2.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Unsigned, 'Where to Begin', p. 2.
[156] Tuli Kupferberg, 'Where Have All the Hippies Gone?' in *International Times* No. 77 (April 1970), p. 19.
[157] Unsigned, 'Diversion and Subversion: Four Years of IT', in *International Times*, No. 90 (October-November 1970), p. 2. The quote is taken from a contemporary statement by George Habash, leader of the Marxist pan-Arab Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.
[158] Richard Chessum, 'Decent British Housewives', in *Black Dwarf*, Vo. 13, No. 9 (January 1969), p. 5.

Conclusion

Speculating, in 1963, on some of the deeper social and cultural developments that had recently served to stymie an earlier generation's efforts to prompt a 'revolutionary' shift in British political consciousness, E. P. Thompson pointed to what he saw as the increasingly diffuse nature of post-war Western societies, and the peculiarly personal demands it necessitated in those who sought to understand them: 'Never before our time', Thompson suggested, 'have intellectuals who operate among higher generalisations been asked to contain within their minds so many complexities and tensions – to comprehend simultaneously the inner dynamic and contradictions of two, and perhaps three, conflicting social systems.'[159] As we have seen, in its earliest phase, (1957 – 59) the New Left proposed the creation (and ceaseless expansion) of a 'third' political and cultural 'space' – a zone of 'permanent openness', and ambiguity – as the only possible site of resistance against an increasingly polarised ideological world. At the heart of this project lay an implicit refusal of 'two-camps thinking'; indeed, to fall into simplistic either/or binaries was seen to have already capitulated to the very 'Cold War' logic new leftists hoped to transcend. For all its equivalent emphasis on expanding consciousness and psychic self-exploration, the revolutionary ambitions associated with '1968' – including much of that advanced by the editors of the contemporary *NLR* – too often amounted to a denial or evasion of this 'inner dynamic', and its related 'complexities and tensions'. As Michael Rustin would later reflect: 'There is an important difference between a politics where it is still expected that protests and appeals may be heard, which is based on indignation that apparently shared values are being betrayed, and a politics which rejects such appeals and the values they evoke as a bourgeois delusion, to be exploited, perhaps, but never even partially believed in.'[160]

As it was, much of the revolutionary optimism associated with 1968 was further underpinned by a parallel refusal on the part of sixty-eighters to either acknowledge or accept the limitations of the ways of life open to them, or, by implication the

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[159] E. P. Thompson, 'Remembering C. Wright Mills', in *Peace News* (November 1963), reprinted in E. P. Thompson, *The Heavy Dancers* (London, 1985), pp. 270 – 271.
[160] Rustin, 'The New Left and the Present Crisis', p. 70.

contradictory terrain that history, and the historical process, had produced. Indeed, for most sixty-eighters, it was taken as read that 'the grey rules of history… exist[ed] only to be broken'.[161] Conceivably, as a result of this, for a brief, yet tantalizing period, some came to experience what the critic Lionel Trilling once identified as 'the ultimate and absolute power which mind can develop when it frees itself from conditions, from the bondage of things and history.'[162] Ironically, much of this also occurred under a newly refashioned Marxist banner: what appeared to have been forgotten, however, was Marx's most crucial historical precept:

> Men makes their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionising themselves and things, in creating something that has never existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.[163]

Conceivably, the *personal* costs of the attempt to live *in spite of history* were, for many sixty-eighters, to be nothing less than devastating: Patricia Holland's, *The Hornsey Film* (1970), documents what became of those students and staff who had participated in the 'occupation' at Hornsey College of Art during the heady summer of 1968; amongst other things the film reveals how, in the two years since the occupation's conclusion, as many as 'forty students… [were] admitted to Friern and Barnett's Mental Hospital.' Indeed, as another student declares: 'All sorts of people have been smashed to pieces in one way or another':

> You constantly sort of fluctuate from sort of feeling sort of pessimistic about things, and then feeling that, you know, you are, this is, you know, because you sort of… during the sit-in and things, things were sort of accelerated and things went through sort of stages at a terrific sort of rate, and you sort of tended to sort of think, 'Oh yes,

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[161] Ali, 'Preface', p. *viii.*

[162] Lionel Trilling, 'George Orwell and the Politics of Truth', in *Commentary*, No. 19 (March, 1952), p. 225.

[163] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [1852] (London 1934), p. 10.

well it's going to sort of go and something else will replace it and things', and I suppose it will, but, um… I don't quite know how to do it, or how to do… get out of the situation, or make it better or whatever it is. I don't quite know really.[164]

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[164] Unidentified female student, quoted in *The Hornsey Film*, dir: Patricia Holland (1970).

Chapter Five

Psychopolitics and Theory Wars: The Denouement of British New Leftism?

> Where ideas are all, the upholder of a contrary thesis becomes automatically an enemy – indeed, the most vicious of enemies since his 'position' is the most direct contestation of the vital truths. Where the revolution is reduced to this poverty, every scrap matters: every opinion, every attitude, every individual adhesion to this or that idea must be fought over like a bone. Antagonism becomes hatred, and polemic is turned into degenerate abuse.
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>> Tom Nairn, 'Why It Happened' in Angelo Quattrocchi and Tom Nairn, *The Beginning of the End: France, May 1968* (London 1968), p. 131.

> Humanism and the 'agenda of 1956' requires defence against their idiotic detractors: but they cannot simply be moved back into place. Between them and us… lies that complex moment of '1968' – a contradictory inheritance which has neither to be simply revived or simply denigrated but reckoned with.
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>> Stuart Hall, 'In Defence of Theory', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London 1981), p. 385.

> I mean, what's happening now, it's so unexplainable… I mean it's extremely sort of… extreme is sort of the results of what happened before; but they're extreme in a sort of invisible way. Because it's… it's… the whole thing has just collapsed on every level you can think of… And *that*… you just can't… you can't film sort of collapse and things like this… There's people collapsing, there's colleges collapsing…   You know, you're in a college and it's supposed to be a bloody nucleus and they're just isn't one… And you just can't film the no-nucleus.
>
>> Unidentified female student, in *The Hornsey Film*, dir: Patricia Holland (1970).

On the evening of Saturday 1 December 1979, in St Paul's Church, 'a crumbling neo-classical ruin near the Oxford University Press', as many as eight hundred of the leading socialist intellectuals in Britain – including several founder members of the early New Left itself – were gathered together for the plenary session of the thirteenth annual Ruskin History Workshop Conference (hereafter HW13).[1] The Conference that year had been convened under the general title of 'People's History and Socialist Theory', with panel discussions on such perennial topics as 'Labour History',

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[1] Martin Kettle, 'The Experience of History', in *New Society*, Vol. 50, No. 896 (December 1979), p. 542. Joining Hall and Thompson among the New Left's founding figures were Dorothy Thompson, Raphael Samuel, John Saville, and Peter Worsley. Elsewhere, in the audience, though conspicuously silent throughout the proceedings, was Perry Anderson: 'I watched from the pews. My own reaction to *The Poverty of Theory* had been somewhat different. It seemed more important to take the measure of Thompson than Althusser. An attempt to do so [*Arguments Within English Marxism*] came out a few months later.' (Anderson, 'In Memoriam', p. 180.)

'Peasant Studies', and 'Class Formation', as well as papers on some of the newer areas of social historical inquiry to have opened since the 1960s, including 'Socialist-Feminism', 'Urban History', and 'Folk Song and Ideology'. The focus of the Saturday plenary, however, was the title piece from E. P. Thompson's recent collection of essays, *The Poverty of Theory* (1978), a characteristically forthright 'intervention' against what Thompson had portrayed as the pernicious influx of 'structuralist' and Althusserian 'marxisms' into the indigenous intellectual culture of the British left in the period following 1968. Joining Thompson on the panel, were Stuart Hall, and another representative from the BCCCS, the historian Richard Johnson.

What ensued has since been remembered as amongst 'the best intellectual theatre that ever took place among British left-wing academics'.[2] Indeed, for those in attendance, the debate seemed to be something more akin to 'gladiatorial combat.'[3] Johnson himself would later recall the experience as 'the worst moment of… [his] professional life', adding that it was only 'somewhat reassuring to remember that, though it was certainly an event in itself, [it] was also a precipitate or condensation of contradictions and unfinished business that had agitated the New Left formation from its earliest years.'[4] Dorothy Thompson would recall the occasion as similarly 'emotionally charged', with 'repercussions continu[ing] for months, if not years.'[5] For Bill Schwarz, meanwhile, HW13 seemed to reflect, if nothing else, 'a moment when… all the issues that mattered were taking place within the discipline of history… [and] the peak of History Workshop's influence in national intellectual life.'[6]

The implicit 'drama' of the occasion was further underlined in the way that it also seemed to represent the culmination of the ongoing quasi-*oedipal* tensions that had characterised relations between Hall and Thompson since even before the launch of *NLR* at the beginning of the 1960s. As Hall himself would later acknowledge, despite his preeminent role in the early New Left's foundation and development his own

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[2] Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain*, p. 221.
[3] Samuel, 'History and Theory', p. 376.
[4] Richard Johnson, 'Historical Returns: Transdisciplinarity, Cultural Studies and History', in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (August 2001), p. 262; p. 275.
[5] Dorothy Thompson, 'Introduction', in E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory: or an Orrery of Errors* (London, 1995), pp. *x – xi*.
[6] Bill Schwarz, 'History on the Move: Reflections on History Workshop', in *Radical History Review*, No. 57 (Autumn 1993), p. 212.

sense of his position within the movement had largely remained one of 'apprenticeship' to those whom he looked upon as his 'symbolic fathers… Edward Thompson, Raymond Williams, Ralph Miliband, Peter Worsley, John Rex…'[7] Even after he had been appointed as the editor-in-chief of the newly-launched *NLR*, Hall had felt under virtually continuous pressure to yield to the whims and wishes of so-called 'senior' figures on the journal's large editorial board, not least, Thompson himself – a pressure that would be a major contributing factor behind his decision to step down from the position, after a little less than two years, in late 1961.[8] Correspondingly, even as late as 1979, Hall could joke how for him to personally engage in a public debate with Thompson still felt a little like 'trampling on the carpet with hobnail boots'.[9] Yet even as the likes of Thompson and Williams had represented for Hall, 'two kinds of heroes', the Jamaican-born immigrant had also rapidly come to realise how 'neither of them could be 'role models''.[10] Indeed, aside from a brief period in which he had attempted to accommodate himself to the native left culture and traditions Thompson and Williams had sought to revivify, Hall never fully lost sight of his own essentially 'diasporic 'take' on my position in the New Left':

> I was always aware of that difference. I was aware that I'd come from the periphery of this process, that I was looking at if from a different vantage point. I was learning to appropriate it, rather than feeling that the culture was already mine.[11]

Such 'moments' as HW13, incorporating the apparent convergence or concatenation, of multiple political, cultural, intellectual and personal trajectories are relatively rare in history: at the forefront of the exchange at HW13 lay profound question marks over

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[7] Stuart Hall, 'At Home and Not at Home: Stuart Hall in Conversation with Les Black', in *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (July 2009), p. 675.

[8] Hall would later reflect that the editorship should, by rights, have gone to Thompson, but that the historian had rejected the role due to his commitment to writing what would become *The Making of the English Working Class*.

[9] Hall, HW13. Unless otherwise stated, quotations in the following are taken from my own transcription of the audio recording of the Saturday plenary session at HW13, available through the Raphael Samuel Audio Collection at the Bishopsgate Institute in London. For selected audio samples from the 1979 Conference, go to: http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/history-workshop-13/

[10] Quoted in *The Stuart Hall Project* [DVD film], directed by John Akomfrah, Smoking Dog Films, (2013).

[11] Quoted in Kuan-Hsing Chen, 'The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual: An Interview with Stuart Hall, in Morley et al, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London & New York, 1996), pp. 495 – 496.

the future direction of, amongst other things, the British Marxist 'tradition', 'cultural studies', 'social history', the British Labour Movement, and, as an adjunct to all of this, the British new-left 'agenda' itself. As it was, virtually none of these things would emerge from HW13 in quite the same way. Moreover, within a few months the political ground in Britain appeared to shift decisively away from the assumptions and propositions around which the debate had bidden. Conceivably, as a result, HW13 would soon come to be remembered as much for the ill-tempered style and tone of the exchange, as it has for the political or intellectual content of what was actually being debated.

New Leftism in the 1970s

However, before we can understand why proceedings at HW13 unfolded as they did, it is first necessary to give some impression of the complex, and often paradoxical, condition in which British new leftism had come to find itself by the beginning of the 1970s. As it is, to some scholars the increasing heterogeneity of new-left thinking and initiatives in this period diminishes the possibility of our taking coherent analysis much beyond 1968: as Madeleine Davis suggests 'a general broadening of British left intellectual culture… [in the 1970s makes] disentangling 'New Left' from 'non-New Left' ideas increasingly difficult'.[12] Elsewhere, taking issue with what he finds to be a 'negative' and 'misinformed' analysis of the life and work of Stuart Hall, Bill Schwarz goes as far as to claim that 'when Rojek states 'there existed 'a curious atmosphere of didacticism and remoteness in much of the New Left work in the 1970s', it is impossible to know about whom he is writing, because by then *there was no New Left*.'[13]

 Such claims are not without foundation: the rapid collapse of the high revolutionary optimism associated with 1968, had by the beginning of the 1970s, already seemed to anathematize much of the intellectual and strategic terrain around which the so-called 'second' generation of new-left intellectuals has sough to orientate themselves. The parallel failure of the *May Day Manifesto* initiative to revivify an earlier mode of new-left political activity over the same period only added to a growing atmosphere

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[12] Davis, 'The Marxism of the British New Left', p. 338.
[13] Bill Schwarz, 'Stuart Hall', in *Cultural Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Spring, 2005), p. 178; 182.

of defeat and despondency. It is ironic, therefore, that it was at precisely this moment of political defeat that the *intellectual* project of the New Left finally seemed to be coming to full fruition. In 1958 new leftists had depicted themselves as venturing into 'uncharted territory… a wasteland where no flowers bloom and few schools contend';[14] by the mid-1970s, it would perhaps not be overstating the case to claim that not only had a hundred new-left flowers *bloomed*, but the degree of contestation between its various institutional manifestations, or 'schools' of thought, was nearing fever pitch. Buoyed, in part, by the 'impressive new left-wing subcultures in the academic and professional intellectual worlds', the 1970s would see the proliferation of 'a rash of new leftist journals', including *Feminist Review, m/f, Policy Radical Philosophy, Radical Science Journal, Red Rag, Screen, Spare Rib*, and *Theoretical Practice*.[15] In the same period, *Ideology and Consciousness* did much to introduce French post-structuralist thought to an English speaking audience, while *Economy and Society*, launched in 1972, played a key part in the ongoing reconfiguration of Marxist and other theoretical perspectives growing out of the preliminary work set out by, amongst others, Ben Brewster at the *NLR* in the late 1960s. *Case-Con*, the magazine 'for revolutionary social work' appeared in 1975, providing an early home for the likes of Doreen Massey and Penny Summerfield. Reflecting the expanding ambitions of the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE), *Capital and Class* was launched in 1977, its stated remit being to provide 'a forum for developing the Marxist critique of bourgeois economics now under way'. Amongst other things its opening editorial statement affirmed the belief 'that theory cannot be short-circuited in the socialist movement… [and] that struggles around concrete issues – housing, under-development, housework, state expenditure cuts – have deep implications at the most abstract level.'[16]

Picking up where the early New Left's original stalled run of 1960-'61 had left off, a new series of New Left Books (NLB) was launched in 1970, its principal remit being to make available, to an English speaking audience, the major 'works of European political and social theory, economics and philosophy', as well as to provide an outlet for 'homegrown' theorists, such as Terry Eagleton, Tom Nairn, and Raymond

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[14] Unsigned, 'Editorial' (Summer 1958), p. 1.
[15] Eley, 'Review', p. 120; Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology*, p. *iv*.
[16] Unsigned, 'Editorial', in *Capital and Class*, No. 1 (Spring 1977), p. 1.

Williams.[17] As Jacob Stevens observes, '[t]he publishing house was always intended to be far broader in its reach than NLR';[18] correspondingly, by the early 1970s NLB's 'volume of output was beginning to overshadow that of the NLR itself'.[19] Indeed, according to Ioan Davies, NLB's impact was sufficiently great, that by the end of the 1970s even Penguin Books and Lawrence & Wishart had also been 'transformed into willing vehicles for New Left manuscripts.'[20]

As the director of the BCCCS Stuart Hall, for one, would later recall how 'the project of the second New Left' had been 'crucial' to both the Birmingham Centre's ongoing efforts to promote a distinctive intellectual identity and remit for itself: 'For the first time [New Left Books]… brought us, in English, the major works of the Frankfurt School, then of Benjamin, and then of Gramsci. Without those "Ur-text," which no one was reading inside the academy, cultural studies could not have developed its project: it could not have survived; it could not have become a field of work in its own right.' [21] The rather piecemeal foundations of British 'cultural studies' are sometimes overlooked. After Hoggart's departure to UNESCO in 1968, the Centre, under Hall's directorship (assisted by Johnson and Michael Green), had begun to direct its efforts more towards situating European political and cultural theory within the context of contemporary British culture and experience.[22] Following a protracted struggle against closure in the late 1960s, the Centre had been transferred from the English department to the Faculty of Social Science. Always viewed with suspicion by Sociology and English Literature, its two closest disciplinary cousins, the 'turn to theory' was increasingly recognised as integral to Centre's efforts to project a more secure disciplinary identity. Nevertheless, with that said, its initial papers remained 'very much early 'work in progress'', produced by an interdisciplinary group of staff and students 'who, in the spirit of the times… organized themselves as a sort of

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[17] Jacob Stevens, 'A Brief History of Verso Books', available at http://www.versobooks.com/pg/about-verso, accessed June 24 2014 at 2.30pm.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?*, p. 70
[20] Ioan Davies, *Cultural Studies and Beyond: Fragments of Empire* (London and New York 1995), p. 14.
[21] Hall, 'The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities', p. 16.
[22] Hall would later admit that '[o]ne of the reasons that Hoggart left [in 1968] was because the Centre was involved in the [student] protests, and he felt as a senior professor that he'd lost control of what was going on in it. He couldn't deliver it as well behaved, well brought up, traditional students with traditional views, etc. So he went to UNESCO.' (Hall, 'Interview – 2 June 2011', p. 770.)

'working collective'.'[23] As Hall suggests, the 'tentative title' of the BCCCS's journal, *Working Papers In Cultural Studies*, 'launched… to raise the profile of the Centre's work… tells its own story.'[24] Arguably, then, to this extent, the Centre's 'shift to marxism' in the period following 1968 appeared to signify a considerable 'a rejection of the central theoretical premise which had characterized cultural studies from the 1950s up until that time.'[25]

A sense of just how broadly Marxist thinking and other radical left perspectives had begun to permeate even the mainstream of British cultural life during the 1970s is provided by a 1972 letter to the long-running political weekly the *Spectator*: 'On every conceivable occasion,' the writer complains, 'the national press, TV and radio networks publish news and views of the myriad of revolutionary anarchist, Communist, extreme Left-wing and other anti-national organisations' at the expense of more mainstream views'. Worse still, however, for this particular observer, was the way the 'New Left's… more prominent members' were also now regularly '[appearing] on news and discussion panels', with 'passages from their published 'works'' even being 'quoted in such unlikely places as… educational, religious and children's programmes'.[26] Elsewhere, a 1971 annex to the JIC's [Joint Intelligence Committee's] paper on 'Subversive Organisations in the United Kingdom', identified amongst its long list of suspect groupings what the paper's anonymous author(s) calls 'the 'New Left' Group'. As Peter Hennessy suggests, the paper offers 'a rare and fascinating snapshot of what MI5 believed it was facing in the early 1970s':

> This group comprises some 30 intellectuals who produce the 'New Left Review'. While it cannot itself be described as an organisation in the sense that it has a party-type structure, it will, through its publication give support to organisations aiming to overthrow the capitalist system and it believes that minority groups, such as the coloured population, students and national liberation groups in underdeveloped countries are leaders in the struggles against capitalism and imperialism.[27]

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[23] Hall, 'Preface', p. *x*.
[24] Stuart Hall, 'Preface' in Ann Gray et al (eds), *CCCS Selected Working Papers Volume 1* (Oxford 2007), p. *ix*.
[25] Colin Sparks, 'Stuart Hall, Cultural Studies and Marxism', in Morley et al, *Stuart Hall*, p. 83.
[26] Philip Baker, 'Forgotten Right', in *The Spectator* (October 13th 1972), p. 29.
[27] Peter Hennessy, *The Secret State: Preparing for the Worst 1945 - 2010* (London 2002), p. 127; 137-8

The paper goes on to document how 'the New left influence is strong in universities', whilst '[i]n London, Oxford, Cambridge, Birmingham and the North East New Left influence has been prominant [*sic*] in left wing circles.' Though it would be 'impossible to assess the influence of the New Left since it deals in ideas rather than membership and organisation', its main perspectives, are described as having 'gained wide currency in intellectual circles', and 'to this extent', the paper concluded, 'its influence must be taken seriously.'[28] In a similar context, Humphrey Carpenter has described, how 'the growing allegiance to the New Left among young British intellectuals' in the 1970s contributed to a growing suspicion in the right-wing press (and elsewhere), that even the very highest levels of the BBC had fallen under the sway of left-wing 'revolutionaries'.[29] Indeed, by 1975 this concern was sufficiently great for MI5 to establish a special desk geared directly towards the investigation of 'subversives in the media'.[30]

By any standard, this permeation of Marxian, and other radical left perspectives into the very mainstream of British cultural life must be seen as an extraordinary achievement, and a considerable vindication of the Andersonian *NLR*'s strategic efforts to advance socialist thought in Britain beyond '[t]he debased version of Marx which has had currency for so long'.[31] Anderson's 'Components of the National Culture' (1968) had insisted that '[a] political science capable of guiding the working-class movement to final victory… [could] *only* be born within a general intellectual matrix which challenges bourgeois ideology in *every* sector of thought and represents a decisive, hegemonic alternative to the cultural *status quo*'.[32] By 1975, it had begun to look to some as if such a matrix was already come on the brink of coming into being. As Noel Annan would later describe it:

> Britain had now acquired a new radical intelligentsia. It overflowed into broadcasting, journalism, publishing, architecture, design and a multitude of white-collar jobs.... After the war marxists such as John Saville, Raphael Samuel, and later

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[28] Quoted in Hennessy, *The Secret State*, p. 138.
[29] Carpenter, *Dennis Potter*, p. 328.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Anderson, 'Socialism and Pseudo-Empiricism', p. 27.
[32] Anderson, 'Components of the National Culture', p. 215 [emphasis added].

the contributors to the *New Left Review*, had been marginal men. Now in the seventies they appeared as epic figures on campus. [33]

Within a little over a decade, Marxism in Britain had been transformed from 'a system of political thought which… was very generally regarded as un-English, irrelevant and irremediably out-of-date', to one of the most recognisable political and intellectual 'tendencies' in British cultural life.[34]

Malaise

Yet as much as it may have 'become commonplace to talk of 'a renewal of Marxism'' in the 1970s, the decade would also provide the backdrop for a considerable contraction of the radical utopian projections and hopes upon which that very process of 'renewal' and 'rediscovery' had been inaugurated a little over a decade earlier.[35] Writing shortly after the uprising at the Sorbonne in May, 1968, Tom Nairn believed he had witnessed nothing less than 'a new world utter[ing] its first cries'; from this point on, he concluded, 'theory' would have 'to be very audacious merely to catch up with practice.'[36] In the event, however, the wave of optimism upon which such statements had been carried was extremely short-lived. As early as 1970, a roundtable discussion in the *Socialist Register* appeared to have discounted the likelihood of a 'Red Seventies'; indeed, for those like John Saville, 'the likelihood of achieving socialism in Britain in the next two or three decades' had never seemed more 'remote'.[37] Elsewhere David Widgery noted how a significant number of those who claimed to have been 'transformed by 1968' were 'now accommodating to pre-1956 institutions; Left Reformism, the Communist Party and orthodox Trotskyism'.[38] For Raymond Williams, meanwhile, contrasting the rather different 'mood' that had compelled the original period of new leftist activity just two decades earlier, it seemed as if '[d]espondency' had latterly appeared to 'spread so quickly that so far as the Left

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[33] Annan, *Our Age*, p. 381.
[34] Raymond Williams, 'Notes on Marxism in Britain Since 1945', in *New Left Review*, No. 100 (November-December 1976), p. 81.
[35] Robbie Gray, 'E. P. Thompson, History and Communist Politics', in *Marxism Today*, Vol. 23, No. 6 (June 1979), p. 181.
[36] Nairn, 'Why It Happened', p. 176.
[37] John Saville, 'Britain: Prospects for the Seventies IV', in *Socialist Register*, Vol. 7 (London 1970), pp. 210 – 211.
[38] Widgery, 'The Left in Britain', p. 51.

is concerned, it is as well that there are so many morale-boosting attacks from the Right':[39]

> Whoever thinks now of the euphoria of the Labour victory in 1945, of the formation of the National Health Service and the great socialist hopes of nationalisation; of the exodus of a third of the membership of the CP after 1956… of the growth of the New Left as a national movement and the spectacular popularity of CND? The hopes and disappointments of those years might just as well never have occurred.[40]

How then do we explain this paradoxical situation? It should, of course, not be overlooked that behind much of the proliferation of theory in the 1970s, lay an increasingly frantic need amongst certain revolutionary leftists to account for what, even by the beginning of the decade, were beginning to look like the catastrophically misplaced hopes and assumptions of the previous decade. As Gerd-Rainer Horn has described, for a brief, yet intoxicating, moment it had actually seemed as if, '[t]he possibility (and not only the necessity) to change society had suddenly been placed at centre stage for an entire generation of activists'; correspondingly, '[t]he failure of 1968 to change the world placed a question mark over the project once again.'[41] In this light, Duncan Thompson has recently revealed how a internally-circulated 'conspectus' amongst the editors of the *NLR* in the early 1970s, acknowledged how too much of the journal's efforts over the previous ten years had stemmed from 'a combination of illusions: undue pessimism about the First and optimism about the Third Worlds due largely to Sartre… and undue optimism about the development of the Second World, due to the influence of Deutscher.'[42] Similarly, Alastair J. Reid has noted how Anderson's 'pessimistic' reappraisal of Gramsci from the mid-1970s onwards effectively amounted to a '[repudiation of] much of his own intellectual effort throughout the 1960s as typical of idealist distortions in 'Western Marxism'.'[43]

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[39] Williams, 'Only Yesterday', p. 12.
[40] Rée, 'Socialist Humanism', p. 33.
[41] Horn, *The Spirit of '68*, p. 236.
[42] Unsigned, *NLR* 'Decennial Report' (1974), quoted in Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?*, p. 38.
[43] Reid, 'The Dialectics of Liberation', p. 268. See Perry Anderson, 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci', in *New Left Review*, No. 100 (November-December 1976), pp. 5 – 78; and Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*.

In Thompson's view, the Andersonian *NLR*'s 'intention of deepening and clarifying Marxist exegesis' had not been matched by any equivalent expansion of domestic political consciousness; indeed, in most cases, it had coincided with 'a distinct narrowing of intellectual referents' as well as a 'closing down… of certain open areas of examination.'[44] Elsewhere, in his attempt to explain the depleted fortunes of the left at the beginning of the 1970s, Saville had also lamented the dearth of 'hard line theoreticians capable of confronting bourgeois ideas' in any language other than 'unreadable jargon'.[45] Correspondingly, assessing the trajectory of the *NLR* since the mid-1960s David Widgery observed that whilst almost every issue contained 'many articles of exceptional interest, the kind of questions… [which] required clarification in order to go forward as socialists', or that offered 'a perspective that fitted the needs of the Seventies', seemed conspicuously 'absent.'[46] Indeed, through the efforts of the second New Left 'Marxist theory' appeared to have 'been turned into self-sufficient science, carried out by skilled intellectuals', only 'in some way analogous to the workers' struggle'; thus, whilst '[o]ur bookshelves are now suitably enlarged', Widgery concluded, 'I'm not so sure our progress towards socialism has been that greatly advanced.'[47] 'What had been lost', Terry Eagleton would later suggest, 'was rather a certain socialist common sense, however narrowly confined… A cultural climate… in which radical ideas, however hotly disputed, struck resonance because of their evident relevance to a history which was still in turmoil.'[48] 'What', asked Jonathan Rée, 'does it mean to be a revolutionary socialist intellectual – now in 1974, here in Britain?' The one fair certainty, Rée concluded, ' is you are unlikely to be suffused with a sense of brotherly and sisterly trust, or happy solidarity in the aspiration towards an unalienated system of social relations – the sort of trust and solidarity which has characterised all socialist movements that have come anywhere near success.'[49]

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[44] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 105.

[45] Saville, 'Prospects for the Seventies', p. 210.

[46] David Widgery, 'The Left in Britain', in *Socialist Register* Vol. 14 (London, 1977), p. 56.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* [New Edition] (London & New York, 2006), p. *iv*.

[49] Jonathan Rée, 'Socialist Humanism', in *Radical Philosophy*, No. 9 (Winter 1974), p. 33.

Seven Days

An echo of a rather more egalitarian phase of new-left activity came in 1971 with the efforts of, amongst others, Perry Anderson, Anthony Barnett, Alexander Cockburn, Fred Halliday, John McGrath, Tom Nairn, Gareth Stedman Jones, and Peter Wollen, to establish a *new* New-Left magazine. Ostensibly a coalition between the respective editorial committees of *NLR* and *Black Dwarf*, as well as various representatives from the 'underground' press and burgeoning 'Women's Movement', *Seven Days* was proposed as a unique form of 'populist intervention, combining the best of the style of the *Picture Post* in its 1940s heyday with the content of the new, Marxist left.'[50] Like *Picture Post* the new magazine, it was claimed, would offer informed weekly photo-journalism, covering everything from industrial action, the women's liberation, rent-strikes, squatter's rights, 'anti-psychiatry', Northern Ireland, Black power, anti-apartheid campaigns, gay and lesbian equality, hunt-saboteurs, prisoner's living conditions, environmental damage, to 'kids lib' and 'alternative' lifestyles. The primary function – as distinct from both *NLR* and *Black Dwarf* – would not be to tell its readers what to *do*, or what to *think*, but to help them 'to discover the truth of capitalism for themselves, and to realise their own ability to take political power.'[51] In keeping with this egalitarian ethos, 'All [editorial] decisions would be taken collectively, with no staff hierarchy.'[52] Anderson has since recalled the general feeling amongst the editorial collective that *Seven Days* was going to be 'a weekly that would transform the scene', offering, in the process, a new 'style of revolutionary journalism that would not be narrow, formulaic or catechistic, but aimed at a mass readership of the young, educated and critical'.[53] In reality, what people eventually got was a kind of 'revised, downmarketed version of the *New Left Review*';[54] or as John McGrath once put it, 'eighteen months of collective discussion, endless papers, memos, dummies… [and] what finally emerged… [was] a rather boring photo-magazine'.

The collective initially 'believed they could shift' as many '50, 000 copies a week'; sales eventually levelled out at – 'at best' – somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000,

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[50] Fountain, *Underground*, p. 155.
[51] Pre-publication flyer, quoted in Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?*, p. 69.
[52] Anderson, 'Counterpuncher', p. 44.
[53] Ibid, p. 44.
[54] Fountain, *Underground*, p. 154.

not nearly enough to cover the glossy magazine's considerable production overheads.[55] When it eventually folded in March 1972, a final editorial acknowledged some of the difficulties *Seven Days* had encountered in its six-month run, though recapitulated the necessity of a new kind of left politics and culture: 'We in Britain have to create the revolutionary politics that is appropriate to this country… To have to cease publication at this moment is a bitter frustration for us. But either as separate individuals, or in some ongoing form of collective work, we shall be continuing to assist the creation of such a politics'. [56] The *NLR*'s privately circulated Decennial Report in 1974 presented a somewhat gloomier picture, concluding that the *Seven Days* experience had 'dealt the morale and cohesion' of the *NLR* 'the worst blow in its history.'[57] McGrath would later reflect how there would remain 'many reasons… unanalysed, even unknown, for the disaster that this ambitious project turned into': a greater familiarity with the trajectory of the early New Left, one is tempted to suggest, might have spared some of the confusion.[58]

New Leftism and Feminism

A major exception to the general intellectual and strategic malaise within British new leftism during the 1970s, came with the increasing political and cultural significance of the Women's Movement, or so-called 'second-wave' feminism; indeed, as Laura Mulvey has since reflected: 'Whereas so many other political activities became dispersed and went into decline after '68, feminism flourished.'[59] With that said, however, establishing the relationship between the broad phase of new-left initiatives and activity from the late 1950s through to the end of the 1960s, and the subsequent emergence of feminism is far from straightforward; indeed, conceivably, to some, the notion that *any* such line of continuity remains to be traced is dubious at best. As it was, at the 1987 Oxford conference on the New Left, one of the few genuinely enduring areas of controversy revolved precisely around what even Stuart Hall was by then compelled to acknowledge as 'the absence of feminism', and 'complete silence

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[55] Ibid., p. 155.
[56] Ibid., p. 166.
[57] Quoted in Thompson, *Pessimism of the Intellect?*, p. 70.
[58] McGrath, 'Clive Goodwin 1932 – 1977', p. 235.
[59] Quoted in Green, *Days in the Life*

around questions of sexuality' in the early New Left's representative thinking and preoccupations.[60] Moreover, for, Jean McCrindle, the 'absence of women both in the content of the [New Left's] journals and of women who were writing' had, in hindsight, to be seen as 'almost pathological'. Lynne Segal, meanwhile, suggested that '[m]en of the New Left' were themselves victims of a wider cultural tendency in the 1950s whereby women had come to be seen as 'the archenemy of the freedom-loving anarchic young working-class rebel of the day'.[61] Nevertheless, for Sheila Benson, a former secretary of the London New Left Club, the matter was largely academic: 'The New Left did not prefigure the women's movement.'[62] It should perhaps not surprise us, then, to find Juliet Mitchell , writing in 1971, asserting that 'the Women's Liberation Movement [in Britain]… broke upon a socialist consciousness entirely innocent (ignorant) of its necessity.'[63]

At first sight, such claims seem hard to contest: certainly a cursory reading of the early New Left's representative publications and statements reveals little that might suggest any burgeoning proto-feminist consciousness or sensibility on behalf of its leading intellectual lights. As such, according to Segal, most new leftists in this period must be assumed to have already 'accepted unquestioningly a belief central to the fifties [that] women's problems had been solved'.[64] It is only if we extend the concept of new leftism, and the early New Left 'agenda' in particular, beyond its usually defined intellectual and temporal parameters that a rather different impression of the relationship between new leftism and feminism begins to emerge. Thus, even if we take what are now widely recognised as the major institutional manifestations and legacy of the early New Left period – *NLR*, the BCCCS, and, perhaps above all, the History Workshop movement at Ruskin College – it becomes apparent that the movement can be considered to have had at least a hand in facilitating the emergence

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[60] Hall, quoted in Archer et al, *Out of Apathy*, p. 163. Even so, for Hall, it is essential that such questions be seen within a proper historical context, one which is capable of addressing not only 'what it was like to live in a left politics before feminism', but also, 'why the majority of women of the time in the New Left colluded with, and [were] often themselves deeply unconscious about, the New Left's sexism.' (Ibid., p. 163.) In a similar vein, Michael Rustin suggests 'that to berate the [early] New Left… for its sexism is to rely excessively on hindsight. Most people in this situation', Rustin recalls, 'of both sexes, felt themselves to be victims and the pain and anger of the situation, especially for women, still remained for the most part to be publicly articulated.' (Rustin, 'The New Left as a Social Movement', p. 124.)

[61] Quoted in Archer et al, *Out of Apathy*, p. 105; 115.

[62] Ibid., p. 109.

[63] Mitchell, *Woman's Estate*, p. 76.

[64] Quoted in Archer et al, *Out of Apathy*, p. 114.

of feminism in Britain, if only by furnishing the initial forums and platforms through which feminist perspectives first began to gain ground. It was, after all, at a History Workshop meeting, at Ruskin College in November 1969, that Sheila Rowbotham first announced that 'she was working specifically on women's history, and was anyone else?'[65] Whilst Rowbotham's declaration may have been met with 'guffaws', and 'shrieks of laughter' from some male members of the audience, it was from this unlikely moment that the idea of constructing a movement concerned exclusively with representing the experiences of women (both contemporary and historic) first came to fruition.[66] Within three months, the famous Women's Liberation Workshop had been convened at Ruskin College and the 'second wave' of feminism in Britain had been set in motion.

Arguably, however, the significance of the New Left in helping to bring about this moment goes far beyond its strictly institutional contribution. As we have seen, from early on new leftists had recognised that the struggle to engender a new kind of political consciousness in Britain would entail the work of many different hands; not least, it would necessitate attending to those voices and experiences hitherto precluded from mainstream political discourse. Whilst for many new leftists in the late 1950s, this initially manifested in a preoccupation with working-class male youth, it was taken as read that the process would (as it, indeed, did) rapidly come to encompass the experiences of other 'peripheral' or 'excluded' sections of society: immigrants, homosexuals, and, of course, women. As it is, Anna Davin would later recall discussions 'around feminist issues' with respective *New Reasoner* and *ULR* cohorts dating as far back as 1958.[67] At the same time, however, it was also recognised that the parallel effort to forge a meaningful 'common culture' would also necessitate a peculiarly *personal* kind of commitment. As Williams suggested in *The Long Revolution* in 1961:

> The scale of the whole process… in indeed too large to know or even imagine […] But as the revolution itself extends, until nobody can escape it, this whole drift seems

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[65] Anna Davin, quoted in Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, p. 55.
[66] Davin & Sally Alexander, quoted in Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, p. 55; 81.
[67] Quoted in Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, p. 56.

increasingly irrelevant. In naming the great process of change the long revolution, I am trying to learn assent to it, an adequate assent of mind and spirit.[68]

Indeed, a central injunction was that new leftists strive 'to discover and report the truth within [their] own field of vision.'[69] As such, even Mitchell's seminal article 'Women: The Longest Revolution', first published in the *NLR* in 1966, consciously invoked Williams' work of five years earlier as 'a small tribute' to what Mitchell, at least then felt happy to acknowledge as 'a heritage.'[70] To this extent, there can, arguably, be few better examples of the representative 'new left experience' I have tried to invoke here than the moving accounts of personal 'awakening' collected in Michelene Wandor's collection *Once a Feminist* (1990), testifying as they do, to the peculiar blend of excitement and anxiety, tension and anticipation, that can accompany any effort to break from the ideological frame within which one's consciousness has hitherto been contained.

Yet as much as the pioneers of the Women's Movement may have felt a continuity between the early New Left project and their own emancipatory agenda in the 1970s, it was perhaps inevitable that the representative 'mode' through which 1970's feminism came to be expressed owed considerably more to what Rowbotham herself identified as, 'the idiom of 1968'.[71] Perhaps key here was 1968's introduction of a new language of the self. Thus, as Rowbotham suggested in 1969, whilst on one level, much of the thinking behind the Women's Movement appeared to be very concrete ('[it was] about 5s an hour and the suicide rate, about nursery schools and legal discriminations'), it was also advanced as equally important that women seek to describe 'how it feels in the head'; indeed, whilst it may have been 'the external social situation' that most served to 'subdue' women, it was their 'consciousness' which ultimately kept them 'contained'.[72] Correspondingly, if women were ever to be 'convincingly mobilized' it would be necessary to take Marxist theory into hitherto

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[68] Williams, *The Long Revolution*, p. 13.
[69] Thompson, 'Remembering Wright Mills', p. 263.
[70] Mitchell, quoted in Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, p. 111.
[71] Quoted in Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, p. 28. As Wandor herself recalls: 'I believed passionately in the dictum which feminism had taken over from the student movement of 1968, that the 'personal is political'… However uncertain we were, we felt that we were pioneers, visionaries, who make a world and a culture in which inequalities in the home and at work, social injustice, would all come to an end.' (Ibid., p. 3.)
[72] Rowbotham, 'Women's Liberation and the New Politics', p. 2.

'unexplored territory', including a far deeper exploration of 'the way human beings relate to one another':

> This means noticing all the little unimportant things which revolutionary theory tends to regard as not worthy of attention. Like how we live with one another, and how we feel and regard each other, how we communicate with each other... [U]nless we create a revolutionary theory of the microcosm as well as the macrocosm we shall be incapable of preventing our personal practice becoming unconnected to our economic and institutional transformation. We will continually lose ourselves in the new structures we have created.[73]

Stuart Hall would later recall the profound professional, and *personal*, impact of feminism in the early 1970s: amongst other things, he suggested, it compelled him to confront 'the difference between a conviction in your head and a change in how you live'.[74] Similarly, for Gareth Stedman Jones, the ensuing personal and political reconfigurations impelled by an exposure to feminism were fundamental: 'Not only did it change the way in which I thought I ought to live, it also put under critical scrutiny all inherited radical and socialist assumptions, both the verities of political practice and... how the subject matter of history was to be conceived, not least the question of class'.[75] If nothing else, feminism provided the context for a crucial reassertion of the 'subjective' during a period when a considerable proportion of the post-'68 left appeared bent on increasing 'abstraction' in the intellectual realm, and militant sectarian stridency in the political. Indeed, conceivably, to this extent, the early phase of the Women's Movement in Britain came closer to solving the impasse between '1956' and '1968' – or in Stedman Jones' term, to 'build[ing] bridges between the old and the new New Left' – than anything either before or since.[76]

By the mid-1970s, however, even some feminists had begun to feel the allure of more assertive, and muscular, modes of political and intellectual engagement and discourse: As Sue O'Sullivan would later recall: 'I think it was around the *Red Rag* time that I,

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[73] Ibid., p. 25, 30.
[74] Quoted in *The Stuart Hall Project*, dir: John Akomfrah (2013).
[75] Stedman Jones, 'History and Theory', p. 115.
[76] Stedman Jones, 'History and Theory', p. 116. For an example of this effort see, Gareth Stedman Jones, 'From Historical Sociology to Theoretical History', in *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (September 1976), pp. 295 – 305.

and other women who were involved in the same things, really jumped into Marxism and study groups and were honing our positions, our political positions, as Marxists.'[77] Hall would later recall how suddenly 'being targeted as 'the enemy' as the senior patriarchal figure' placed him into 'an impossibly contradictory position… I couldn't fight my feminist students:

> You can be for a practice, but that's a very different thing from a living feminist in front of you, saying 'Let us get Raymond Williams out of the MA programme, and put Julie Kristeva in, instead. Living the politics is different from being abstractly in favour of it. I was checkmated by feminists; I couldn't come to terms with it in the Centre's work… I couldn't live part of the time being their teacher, and being their father, being hated for being their father, and being set up as if I was an anti-feminist man. It was an impossible politics to live.[78]

History and Theory

Arguably, nowhere was the contradictory inheritance of the New Left in Britain felt more acutely in the 1970s than in the discipline of history itself: 'It is a good time to be a social historian', Eric Hobsbawm famously declared in 1970; by the end of the decade some historians had come to believe precisely the opposite.[79] As early as 1961 Thompson had lamented what he saw as the 'relegation of history to an inferior status

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[77] Quoted in Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, p. 224.

[78] Quoted in Chen, 'The Formation of a Diasporic Intellectual', p. 502.

[79] Thus by 1979 Tony Judt was observing that whilst 'some very good social history is currently being produced… the dross has risen rather disturbingly to the surface.' 'The subject', he suggested, 'had become a gathering place for the unscholarly, for historians bereft of ideas and subtlety. The writings… produced are without theoretical content, a failing disguised by an obsession with method and technique. They represent collectively a loss of faith in history.' 'A whole discipline', Judt went on, 'is being degraded and abused; a few more years of the work currently published in certain European and American journals, and social history will have lost all touch with the study of the past […] The present-minded character of the interpretations, the search for 'scientific' status, the refusal to recognise the significance of ideas or politics, the ignorance if the economic (except in so far as it can be tabulated) – all this represents a complete loss of faith in history.' (Tony Judt, 'A Clown in Regal Purple: Social History and the Historians' in *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring 1979), pp. 66 – 94.) For representative expressions of this general loss of confidence, see: E. F. and E. D. Genovese, 'The Political Crisis of Social History: A Marxian Perspective' in *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Winter, 1976), pp. 205 – 220; Gareth Stedman Jones, 'From Historical Sociology to Theoretical History' in *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (September 1976), pp. 295 – 306; Lawrence Stone, 'History and the Social Sciences in the Twentieth Century' in Charles F. Delzell (ed.), *The Future of History* (Nashville 1977), pp. 3 – 42; and Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, 'Why Does Social History Ignore Politics?' in *Social History*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (May, 1980), pp. 249 – 271.

in this country.'[80] '[U]nder the chiding of Sir Lewis Namier and Professor Popper', Thompson claimed, historians had all too easily abandoned the claims of their discipline – a capitulation which, he observed, had already helped to bring about 'a recrudescence of the amateur gentleman tradition (you have to slog at economics or philosophy but anyone's opinion about 'culture' or 'society' is as good as anyone else's).'[81] Notably, at this stage, Thompson fixed his critical sights less on the new analytical pathways in the social sciences, than on what he saw as the parallel 'failure of Marxist historians to take into account whole areas of concern disclosed by sociologists and critics', and the relative 'absence of conceptual historical thinking… in this country for some years.'[82]

Greatly buoyed by the new historiographical perspectives and potentialities opened up by Thompson's *Making* in the early 1960s, the Social History Group had first been convened at Ruskin College, Oxford in 1965, by a coterie of young socialist historians including Gareth Stedman Jones, Joaquin Romero Maura, Tim Mason, and, in a central organising capacity, Raphael Samuel. By 1967 the Group had evolved into the more self-consciously political History Workshop, 'a loose coalition of worker-historians and full-time socialist researchers'.[83] As Samuel would later describe, the Workshop was conceived as simultaneously an alternative and 'as an attack on the examination system, and the humiliation it imposed on adult students… [It reflected] an attempt to create, within a very limited compass, an alternative educational practice, to encourage Ruskin students – working men and women, drawn from the labour and trade union movement – to engage in research, and to construct their own history as a way of giving them an independent critical vantage point in their reading.'[84] In this sense, at least, the Workshop very much seemed to be apiece with the political and cultural ferment surrounding 1968, not least the parallel 'Free School' and 'Anti-University' movements of the same period. As Samuel would later acknowledge, most of the Workshop's founders had been 'very responsive to the student revolt of 1968', with early gatherings taking place amidst an atmosphere

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[80] Thompson, 'The Long Revolution', p. 31.
[81] Ibid., p. 32.
[82] Ibid., p.31.
[83] Raphael Samuel, 'Editorial Introduction', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *History Workshop: A Collectanea 1967 – 1991* (London, 1991), p. 1.
[84] Ibid.

'tense with political expectancy'.[85]At the same time, however, if only through the person of Samuel himself, the Workshop also owed something to the earlier period of nascent 'cultural revolt' that had emerged in Britain during the latter half of the 1950s. Indeed, '[u]nlike other counter-cultural initiatives of the late 1960s, History Workshop had a strong sense of lineage.'[86] Indeed, '[t]he name 'History Workshop'', was itself 'transposed or adapted from' Ewan MacColl's and Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop movement of the 1930s, 'an inspiring amalgam of the experimental and the popular'.[87]

As early as 1967, Stedman Jones' 'The Pathology of English History', had lambasted what its author saw as British historians' woeful disregard and ignorance of the classical European sociological canon – a charge, which, as Stedman Jones himself would later concede, 'clearly derived from what was then a shared *Review* position.'[88] Indeed, in Stedman Jones' view, it was, at least partly, the 'failure' of British Marxists such as Hill, Hobsbawm and Thompson to have provided a sufficiently theorised counter-narrative to the prevailing liberal-positivist assumptions of most mainstream national history which now made it beholden on a new generation of socialist historians to set about formulating 'the *theoretical* foundations of any history.'[89]

Ben Brewster's translation of Althusser's 'Contradiction and Over-Determination' appeared in *NLR* 147, in 1967. Introducing the work, Brewster had opined that 'many socialists in England are still defending Marxist humanism against Stalinist dogmatism without realizing that the battle is largely won… To bring Marxist theory in line with contemporary conditions a completely new conception is needed. Althusser's work represents one approach to such a Scientific Marxism.'[90] In

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[85] Ibid.

[86] Raphael Samuel, 'Nineteenth Century Cromwell'' in Samuel (ed.), *A Collectanea 1967 – 1991*, p. 92.

[87] Raphael Samuel, 'History Workshops, 1 – 13', in Samuel (ed.) *A Collectanea 1967 – 1991*, p. 97. As Samuel goes on to observe, 'within a very few years [employment of the term 'Workshop']… was a commonplace in counter-culture initiatives.'

[88] Stedman Jones, 'History and Theory', p. 112. Writing 2001, Stedman Jones admitted that he found 'The Pathology of English History' 'a difficult essay to re-read, not only because of its arrogant style, but also because of the substance of its argument, which I had completely forgotten.' (Stedman Jones, 'History and Theory', p. 111)

[89] Gareth Stedman Jones, 'History: The Poverty of Empiricism' in Robin Blackburn (ed.) *Ideology in Social Science: Readings in Critical Social Theory* (Glasgow 1972), p. 115.

[90] Ben Brewster, 'Presentation of Althusser', in *New Left Review*, No. 41 (January-February 1967), p. 14.

Althusser's reading, Marx's crucial epistemological shift from the humanistic preoccupations of the 1840s and 1850s, to the later phase of social scientific practice had only ever been partially, and thus inadequately, articulated. Correspondingly, its assimilation into the corpus of thought dubbed 'Western Marxism' had itself been subject to considerable confusion and distortion. In order to combat and correct these distortions Althusser proposed a strategy of rigorous theoretical vigilance. As Keith Nield and John Seed would subsequently reflect, in reality, this amounted to 'a tendency in Althusserianism to excise more and more of [Marx's] work as ideologically infected, reducing to a mere handful those texts which have survived unscathed this extensive and scrupulous interrogation.'[91]

The Pathology of E. P. Thompson and the 'English Idiom'

Conceivably, much of the discussion surrounding the publication of *The Poverty of Theory* in 1978 revolved less around the epistemological and historical arguments contained within the essay, than it did the personal character and psychic constitution of E. P. Thompson himself. Informing this was a growing sense amongst certain socialist intellectuals that Thompson's influence, by the early 1970s, was invariably serving to 'block', as much as it did facilitate, 'the production of *really useful knowledge*', and that for the impasse to be overcome it might now be necessary to consign the historian, and the native 'tradition' he sought to advance, to their peculiar historical context once and for all.[92] Indeed, ironically, at the very moment that Thompson's mainstream domestic and international star was nearing its ascendancy, arguably, so too was his standing amongst the post-'68 intellectual left in Britain approaching its critical nadir. Correspondingly, the 1970s and 1980s would see numerous attempts to, in Perry Anderson's words, 'take the measure of Thompson'.[93]

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[91] Keith Nield & John Seed, 'Theoretical Poverty or the Poverty of Theory: British Marxist Historiography and the Althusserians', in *Economy & Society*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (November, 1979), p. 386.
[92] Richard Johnson, 'On Theoretical Absolutism', in Ruskin History Workshop, *Ruskin History Workshop 13:People's History and Socialist Theory Position Papers* (Oxford 1979) [unpaginated]
[93] Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, p. 180. For further examples, see Harvey J. Kaye & Keith McClelland (eds.), *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1990); Robbie Gray, 'E. P. Thompson, History and Communist Politics', in *Marxism Today* (June, 1979), pp. 181 – 187; Paul Hirst, 'The Necessity of Theory', in *Economy and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (November, 1979), pp. 417 – 445; Richard Johnson, 'Edward Thompson, Eugene Genovese, and Socialist-Humanist History', in *History Workshop Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn, 1978), pp. 79 - 100; Gavin Kitchin, 'The Preoccupations of Edward Thompson: A View from the Stalls', included as an 'annexe' to *Ruskin*

Despite his own ongoing sense of isolation, Thompson by the beginning of the 1970s was by any reckoning, a major figure on the international political and intellectual scene: *The Making of the English Working Class* had already brought him widespread critical attention and acclaim, as well as appearing to '[turn] him temporarily into an orthodox academic'.[94] A poll conducted in the mid-1970s identified the historian as 'one of the four most respected or best-known figures in British public life, along with the Queen Mother, Queen Elizabeth II, and Margaret Thatcher.'[95] As it was, speaking from the platform at HW13 in 1979, even Thompson acknowledged how he was becoming increasingly 'restive about the cult of Thompsonism' that had been gathering pace over the previous two decades.

Following the disintegration of the early New Left in the first half of the 1960s Thompson had returned his focus towards the historiographical questions first proposed in *The Making of the English Working Class*. In a series of landmark articles published between 1965 and 1978, he had offered increasingly nuanced readings of such perennial Marxist categories as 'consciousness', 'class', 'agency', and 'experience'.[96] As Hall would later acknowledge, through this work Thompson had 'made himself the undisputed master of a history' that sought to 'recover' and 'recapture' 'the lived historical experience of classes', including that which 'official history' had 'banned from the record.'[97] At the same time, with his insistence on 'class' as a 'cultural as much as an economic formation', and commensurate refusal of the overly-drawn distinction between 'class' and 'class consciousness' he had

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History Workshop 13; Susan Magarey, 'That Hoary Old Chestnut, Free Will and Determinism: Culture vs. Structure, or History vs. Theory in Britiain', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (July, 1987), pp. 626 – 639; Gregor McLennan, 'E. P. Thompson and the Discipline of Historical Context', in Johnson, et al (eds.), *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics* (London, 1982), pp. 96 – 132; Keith Nield and John Seed, 'Theoretical Poverty of the Poverty of Theory: British Marxist Historiography and the Althusserians', in *Economy and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (November, 1979), pp. 383 – 416.

[94] Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 215.

[95] Quoted in Abelove et al, *Visions of History*, p. 6.

[96] See E. P. Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English'; 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', in *Past & Present*, No. 38 (December, 1967), pp. 56 – 97; 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', in *Past & Present*, No. 50 (February, 1971), pp. 76 – 136; 'Rough Music: Le Charivari Anglais', in *Annales: Economies, Societés, Civilisations*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (1972); 'Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture, in *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer, 1974), pp. 382 – 405; & 'Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?', in *Social History*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (May, 1978), pp. 133 – 165. These articles would go on to form the backbone of Thompson's much-anticipated 'sequel' to *The Making of the English Working Class*, eventually published as *Customs in Common* (London, 1991).

[97] Hall, 'In Defence of Theory', p. 383.

helped to provide the context for a considerable revivification of social history itself.[98] As it was, 'by the 1970s a broad acceptance of 'the determination of consciousness by social being'… had almost become part of the commonsense of the profession.'[99]

Nevertheless, as Susan Margery would later reflect, it was the very protean nature of Thompson's historical concepts which ensured that his distinctive brand of 'socialist humanism was always vulnerable to interpretation as culturalist rather than materialist, and to criticism from a structuralist Marxism seeking a less mystical understanding of the interrelationship between relationships of production and ideological formations.'[100] Correspondingly, Jonathan Rée recalls how the majority of his leftwing 'friends and colleagues' at *Radical Philosophy* in the early 1970s had come to '[regard] socialist humanism as obsolete, and E. P. Thompson as an obsessive individualist stuck in the past; to put it politely', Ree suggests, '[he] bored them.'[101] At the beginning of 1974, Rée invited Tom Nairn to revisit the famous debate that had developed between him, Perry Anderson and Thompson a decade earlier. Declining Rée's invitation, Nairn explained that he had himself recently been accumulating a considerable amount of material on the prevalence of "left-wing Romanticism" in English political life, and on the "history of the EPT-*nlr* polemic" in particular; indeed, through his ongoing efforts to provide an answer to the question "why marxism had had so little effect in England", Nairn had found himself being increasingly drawn towards compiling "a history of Thompsonism". Moreover, in the process, he had come to believe that there was now ultimately little to distinguish Thompson's 'undeniably parochial' style of left 'national romanticism' from that that which had recently manifested under the guise of the renegade Conservative MP, Enoch Powell. Correspondingly, Nairn informed Rée, far from wishing to revisit his notorious encounter with Thompson in the 1960s, he was now 'hoping that we won't

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[98] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 13. At HW13, even Thompson's detractors were compelled to note how it was his influence that had first awoken them to the emancipatory significance of history, or, as Philip Corrigan expressed it in his position paper, how 'it was… Edward Thompson who kicked the bloody jail door open.' (Philip Corrigan, 'On Not Writing On the Back of the Latest Postage Stamp: A Contribution to a Debate', in *Ruskin History Workshop 13*, [unpaginated].)
[99] Stedman Jones, 'Anglo-Marxism, Neo-Marxism and the Discursive Approach to History', p. 151.
[100] Susan Margery, 'That Hoary Old Chestnut, Free Will and Determinism: Culture vs. Structure, or History vs. Theory in Britain', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (July 1987), p. 629.
[101] Rée, 'E. P. Thompson and the Drama of Authority', p. 215.

ever be plunged back into a situation where that sort of village-idiot tradition again becomes politically pressing.'[102]

In their efforts to account for what they see as the growing intransigence and imperiousness of Thompson's position in the 1970s, critics have been quick to point to the historian's ongoing feelings 'of injury and betrayal' regarding the transition of 1962-3, and his commensurate inability to either assimilate or offset the parallel cultural sea-changes associated with the 1960s.[103] Eric Hobsbawm would later recall how Thompson 'suffered bitterly from the failure of the 1956 New Left', and that its decline left him both 'insecure and vulnerable'.[104] Indeed, even amongst Thompson's defenders there is an acknowledgement that for much of 1970s the historian 'seemed… to be making the whole matter turn on himself and his own hurt pride.'[105] Speaking in the mid-1970s Thompson would himself acknowledge how '[nothing had discouraged him] more in the sixties than [his feeling] that a whole generation of the Left, and of Marxists, was arising whose arrows were all going straight past the ear of the opposition because they were talking a different vocabulary, and in another place.'[106] Elsewhere, he recalled how 'for ten years', following the collapse of the early New Left, he had 'suffered my own dejection consequent upon the sudden re-emergence throughout the West of the "closed" Marxisms… some of them in the most doctrinaire, didactic and thought-resistant forms…'; indeed, for much of this period, it had felt to Thompson as if he had 'been left talking, or merely thinking to [himself]'.[107]

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[102] Letter from Tom Nairn to Jonathan Rée, May 26th, 1974. Quoted in Rée, 'E.P. Thompson and the Drama of Authority', p. 216. Some of the 'fruits' of Nairn's research had already appeared in his article, 'British Nationalism and the EEC' (*New Left Review*, No. 69 (September – October, 1971) pp. 3 – 28); and, in an extended special edition of *NLR*, as 'The European Problem' (*New Left Review* (Special Issue), No. 75 (September – October, 1972), pp. 5 – 120.) The latter was later published in book form, with further minor revision's, as *The Left Against Europe?* (London, 1973). See the note on Thompson and Williams on page 111. Nairn's assault on what he saw as forms of 'left-wing nationalism' would continue to define his work throughout the 1970s, culminating in his prophetic, *The Break-Up of Britain* (London, 1977, 1981) – see, particularly, pp. 303 – 305.

[103] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 98.

[104] Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 216.

[105] Jonathan Rée, 'A Theatre of Arrogance', in *Times Higher Education* (June 5th 1995), available at https://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/a-theatre-of-arrogance/98630.article, accessed 21 June, 2013.

[106] Quoted in Abelove, *Visions of History*, p. 19.

[107] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 185.

One of the principal charges to be set against Thompson and *The Poverty of Theory* is that there was simply no need for him to have produced the book; that his would-be intervention emerged at a moment when, to most observers, '[t]he alleged 'spell' of Althusser, in so far as it ever existed, had already been broken;'[108] and that with his hysterical portrait of rampant Althusserians roaming the corridors of humanities departments up and down the land, 'slay[ing] mythical monsters ('humanism', 'moralism')', Thompson created a 'mythical monster' of Althusser himself.[109] Thus as Eric Hobsbawm recalled in 2002: there was simply 'no… justification' for Thompson's 'Althusserian episode' 'I told him at the time that it would be criminal to turn from his potentially epoch-making historical work to controverting a thinker who would be dead as an influence in another ten years' time. And indeed, Althusser was already getting close to his sell-by date in the French Marxisant milieu even then.'[110] Stedman Jones: 'By the late 1970s… the time for these battles between history and theory had all but passed.'[111] For Stedman Jones, watching from the stalls, Thompson's attack 'seemed to be a polemic stuck in the years before 1956.' Moreover, for him 'the interest of reading Althusser and other French theorists had little to do with politics… If Edward Thompson [had] wished (yet again) to settle accounts with Stalinism, Althusser was an inappropriate target.'[112]

Writing in 2005, Dorothy Thompson defended her husband's intervention, insisting that whilst it might have been the case that Althusser had 'made little impact on practising historians', he was 'a major force among graduate students and some young historians and literary scholars'; indeed, '[i]t was the influence that Althusser's writings were having on scholarship that made Edward take on the uncongenial task of putting the case for history against his closed system…[The] message that history was a non-discipline and that its study was of no value' appeared to be rapidly gaining ground and needed to be countered in the strongest possible terms.[113] Moreover, as Keith Nield and John Seed would suggest in 1979, 'the importation of the work of Louis Althusser in to England in the late 1960s and early 1970s…' can be interpreted

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[108] Gray, 'History, Marxism and Theory', p. 164.
[109] Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory', p. 216.
[110] Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 215,
[111] Stedman Jones, 'History and Theory', p. 117.
[112] Stedman Jones, 'History and Theory', p. 116.
[113] Thompson, 'Introduction', p. *x*.

as rather 'more than a passing fashion.'[114] Correspondingly, Tony Judt would later recall how for a period in the late 1960s and early 1970s, 'Althusser was touted by everyone I met as a man of extraordinary gifts, who was transforming our understanding of Marx and reshaping revolutionary theory. His name, his ideas, his books were everywhere.'[115]

As Thompson himself acknowledged, he saw 'Althusserianism [as]… only one extreme form – *and perhaps a passing form* – of a general malaise, not of theory only, but of the political presence of today's Socialist movement.' In abstracting 'its characteristics *as ideology*', he suggested, he had '[intended] to mark also certain features which it shares with other Marxisms of closure.'[116] Thompson goes on to acknowledge that if Althusserianism really was 'no more than one of the successive fashions by which the revolting Western intelligentsia can do their thing without practical pain', then he had indeed been 'wasting [his] time'; the matter, he insisted, however, was 'more serious than that': Althusserianism was 'actively reinforcing and reproducing the effective passivity before 'structure' which hold us all prisoners.'[117] On an intellectual level, it had '[enforced] the rupture between theory and practice', and '[diverted] good minds from active theoretical engagement'; 'at a level of more vulgar political discourse, it [had afforded] theoretical legitimations for all the stupidest and most dangerous half-truths, which one had supposed, had at last gone away: that 'morality = the interests of the working class', that 'philosophy = class struggle', that 'democratic rights and practices = 'liberal' ideology'.[118] Put plainly, to Thompson, Althusserianism represented the intellectual repudiation of virtually everything the new-left 'agenda of 1956' had sought to advance; correspondingly, if such a theory were ever to attain any genuine political purchase, 'so far from 'liberating' the working class' it would 'in its insufferable arrogance and pretensions to 'science', deliver them into the hands of a bureaucratic clerisy: the *next* ruling-class, waiting on the line.'[119]

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[114] Nield et al, 'Theoretical Poverty or The Poverty of Theory', p. 383.
[115] Tony Judt, 'Elucubrations: The 'Marxism' of Louis Althusser', in *New Republic*, No. 7 (March 1994), reprinted in Judt, *Reappraisals*, p. 106.
[116] Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory', p. 376.
[117] Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory', pp. 378 – 379.
[118] Ibid., p. 379,
[119] Ibid.

Almost as hotly contested, however, as *what* Thompson was saying in the 1970s, was the characteristic 'mode' or 'idiom' in which he was saying it. Indeed, conceivably it was perhaps partly the grouping of his attack on Althusser in *The Poverty of Theory* with some of his earlier would-be *interventionary* broadsides – 'Outside the Whale' (1960), 'The Peculiarities of the English' (1965), and 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' (1973) – that had reemphasised to those such as Richard Johnson, just how much Thompson's polemical voice had set the tone of debate and discussion over the previous two decades. In a penetrating analysis of what he interpreted as some of the characteristic linguistic and theoretical deficiencies contained in *The Poverty of Theory*, Richard Webster found Thompson guilty of, among other things, being 'too easily lured up into the very rarefied atmosphere of abstraction against which he inveigh[ed].'[120] Indeed, whilst he generally assented to Thompson's criticisms of Althusserianism, not least, its '[failure] even to begin to investigate the realm of the emotions, of the irrational and of sexual behaviour', Webster found that Thompson's 'own practice and his metaphorical language' 'repeatedly betray[ed] him' into replicating the very 'habits of the totalitarian imagination he [sought] to oppose'.[121] 'The result', in Webster's summary, was 'a complex, intellectual, psychological and ideological knot.'[122] Similarly, in a spirited rebuttal against some of the personal charges set against him and his colleague Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst suggested that in *The Poverty of Theory* Thompson had deployed '[metaphorical] imagery so frequently and thoughtlessly that parts of his text' had taken on 'an oneirocritic quality …[amounting] to a presentation of its unconscious.'[123]

According to Anderson, when challenged by others on this score, Thompson was always quick to reach for what he claimed as 'the polemicist's warrant'[124] Indeed, by his own admission, Thompson was aware that he had 'sometimes exaggerated differences and put friendships into jeopardy', in this way; equally, however, he suggested it was 'only by facing into opposition that I am able to define my thought at

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[120] Richard Webster, 'E. P. Thompson and the Althusserian Locusts: An Exercise in Practical Criticism', unpublished c. 1982, available at http://www.richardwebster.net/locusts.html, accessed 21 October 2013 at 5.30hrs.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Paul Hirst, 'The Necessity of Theory', in *Economy and Society*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (November 1979), p. 418.
[124] Anderson, 'In Memoriam', p. 179.

all.'[125] Yet for Thompson, polemic was far more than just an available mode or style through which to couch an argument; indeed, arguably, for him the medium was a considerable part of the message. certain way of thinking and perceiving – one which relies on creating a crucial tension between, head and heart, thinking and feeling, emotion and intellect. To Thompson it was partly the abstraction of feeling and emotion from Marxist-Communist discourse in the first half of the twentieth century that had led to the worst excesses of Stalinist ideology and practice. Thompson 'saw the dispute not only as a scholarly one, but as the tackling of a set of assumptions which in politics could be taken to justify Stalinism and the discredited methods of the old Communist parties.'[126]

As we have seen, even long before the organisational collapse of the early New Left had become apparent, Thompson himself had been harbouring profound concerns about what he saw as a growing factional/generational drift within the movement towards contemporary cultural preoccupations, at the sake of more 'traditional', or historically-rooted, conceptions of revolutionary struggle. Indeed, whilst the ensuing editorial/generational tensions at the *NLR* in 1962/3, and subsequent polemical exchanges between Thompson and Anderson from the mid-1960s onwards, would later serve to give the impression that the crucial divergence within British new-left thought stemmed from a more or less straightforward antagonism between distinct, 'empiricist' and 'theoreticist' agendas, it was nevertheless the case that, as early as 1959, an equally significant division between might be termed 'culturalist' and 'historicist' new leftists had also already begun to manifest.

Equally problematic, for Thompson, had been Williams' insistence on the need for a 'new vocabulary', more amenable to the complex culture and society that appeared to be emerging as Britain entered the 1960s. The 'danger', for Thompson, of 'breaking' with *existing* 'modes' and 'idioms' too readily was not only that it would make the dialogue between otherwise complimentary disciplines – history, sociology, economics, English Literature – 'extraordinarily difficult', but that it would also render '[Williams'] own avowed intention' of *synthesising* 'an adequate sense of

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[125] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 186.
[126] Thompson, 'Introduction', p. *xi*.

general human organisation', virtually impossible.[127] As it was, the ultimate effect of reading *The Long Revolution*, for Thompson, had been to reaffirm his sense of the importance of rooting any general 'theory' within the context of actual 'lived experience': only history, he insisted, had the capacity to reveal the 'sense of conflict, paradox, of cultural 'lag' and contradiction' that accompanies any 'revolutionary' transition or process.[128] By the early 1970s, however, Thompson had come to believe that the very 'language' of the dissident tradition in danger of disappearing beneath 'smothered ridicule.'[129] Thus 'the problem for a socialist intellectual', as he saw it, had become 'two-fold: (a) the near impossibility of *not* selling himself, of not being 'taken up' in certain secondary ways, and (b) the near-impossibility of communicating at all in primary and deeply-serious ways.'[130]

Conclusion

Shortly after the 'implosion' at HW13, Thompson published a new 'manifesto of his fears' in the *NLR*:[131] according to Perry Anderson, 'Notes on Exterminism: The Last Stages of Civilization?' should be considered 'in effect, the founding text of the peace movement of the period.'[132] It was also, however, to be one of the last major political interventions Thompson would ever make. Indeed, though he would remain a luminous presence in the European Nuclear Disarmament (END) movement throughout the 1980s, Thompson never returned to frontline polemical debate in quite the same way again.[133] Whilst this can be considered as at least partly due to a conscious decision on the anti-nuclear campaigner's part to 'set aside other politics, as divisive of a common cause', as well as increasingly failing health, it might also be thought to point towards a recrudescence of the 'self-isolating' tendencies that had

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[127] Thompson, 'The Long Revolution', p. 31.
[128] Ibid., p. 29.
[129] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 103.
[130] Ibid., p. 183.
[131] Samuel, 'History Workshops, 1 – 13', p. 96.
[132] Anderson, 'In Memoriam', p. 180.
[133] One notable exception is the last essay he published in *NLR*, 'The Ends of Cold War': 'This is an old habit of the editors and contributors who have conducted *New Left Review* so tenaciously since the early 1960s. While they are willing to employ copiously the somewhat empty (and in my view culturally relativist) term 'the Third World', the very possibility of a 'third way'—or a fourth or a fifth—or, indeed, of a reopening field of possibility, in which new variants of social formation and new combinations of old and newer modes of production might be expected to arise, is ruled out of order as a categoric impossibility.' (E. P. Thompson, 'The Ends of Cold War', in *New Left Review*, No. 182 (July-August 1980), p. 143.)

characterised Thompson's response to both the disintegration of the early New Left in 1962/3, and the respective 'failure' of the *May Day Manifesto* initiative in 1968/9. [134] His absence from the British left's generally hapless attempts to apprehend the onslaught of Thatcherism throughout the 1980s seemed telling. A article published in the *LRB* in 1987, he admitted that he found the accompanying cultural 'sea change' difficult to assimilate:

> What makes me feel old… is the realisation that what I had thought to be widely-held principles are now little more than quaint survivals among the least flexible of my generation… Times and manners have changed… If my wife and I and a few friends want to hold out for old 'principles' no one is going to stop us. But I have to recognise now that such a stiff-backed sense of honour could cost even rick to one's life… One is left with a 'principle' that the young can't even understand, which is ineffectual (unless self-damaging), and which is really a private notion of honour. Or a stuffy habit of the old. And I suddenly can see the survivors of the socialist age-cohort as historical reliques… a goldmine for the oral historian, and Raphael Samuel will collect us as specimens in a nostalgic book… Or perhaps no one else notices these metamorphoses of culture and moralities any more?[135]

Dorothy Thompson would later describe how her husband's final years were an ongoing 'struggle against the clock when he had to publish work that he did not feel was ready and to republish pieces that he had hoped to expand into major studies.'[136] As it was, by the time of his death in August 1993, Thompson had come to be seen by some as a peculiarly chastened figure, gradually acclimatising himself to the role of latter-day English country squire, at his Georgian manor-house at Wick Episcopi, near Worcester.[137] a far cry from his radical past; yet as he had once predicted himself: 'If I am silent it will not be because I have changed my opinions, although it might be because of a lessening of political or personal morale, or a lack of any sense of audience.'[138]

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[134] Anderson, 'In Memoriam', p. 186.

[135] E. P. Thompson, 'Diary', in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 9, No. 9 (7 May 1987), p. 21.

[136] Dorothy Thompson, 'Introduction', in E. P. Thompson, *The Essential E. P. Thompson*, (London & New York, 2001) p. *ix*.

[137] See for example the reflections collected in, 'Edward Palmer Thompson 1924 – 1993: In Memoriam', in *Studies in Political Economy*, No. 43 (Spring 1994), pp. 6 – 31.

[138] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 186.

Conclusion

'Acknowledging Ourselves in the Beast'

Only we, who are now living, can give a 'meaning' to the past. But that past has always been, among other things, the result of an argument about values. In recovering that process, in showing how causation actually eventuated, we must, insofar as the discipline can enforce, hold our own values in abeyance. But once this history has been recovered, we are at liberty to offer our judgment upon it.

> E. P. Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory: or an Orrery of Errors' in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London 1978), p. 234.

Today… the past is not seen as a prelude to the present but as an alternative to it, 'another country', and 'heritage' is more typically defined in terms of relics under threat… Dissevered from any idea of national destiny, it is free to wander at will, taking up residence and holding court at quite recently discovered historical locations and attaching itself to a promiscuous variety of objects: not only jeweled treasures… but also the prehistoric apple-seeds which archaeologists are miraculously extracting from time-warped and fossilized faeces.

> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London 1994), p. 221.

I've used the immediate past to intrude upon the present, so that it isn't a thing out there, the past, which is done with, it is actually running along beside us now, and its… misconceptions and its values, and its correct conceptions can be seen just that degree more clearly… just simply letting that time be in order to show what this time is like… Nostalgia says it's safely back there, and, Oh those dear dead days and all that, and wrings a tear from your eye, because they are unreclaimable, but I say they are reclaimable and that they are… there and here.

> Dennis Potter, 'An Interview with Alan Yentob, BBC 2' (1987), reprinted in *Seeing the Blossom: Two Interviews, a Lecture and a Story* (London 1994), p. 71.

In March 2013 I attended the 33rd annual conference of the Social History Society in Leeds. During the questions and answers slot at the end of one panel session, E. P. Thompson's name was invoked as an authority on some or other point of inquiry. The panelist in question parried and equivocated: 'Thompson was good on some things, less useful on others… Historiography has come a long way since the 1960s… Thompson's gifts as a historian were always undermined by his politics…' How long this might have continued is unclear, as just then a female colleague came to the speaker's aid, seemingly bringing the matter to a decisive close: 'Absolutely!' she said: 'And why should we care what Thompson thought?' A signal to me that I had perhaps already been spending far longer than was either sensible or healthy

immersed in the 'angry' culture of the 1950s was that I immediately heard in my mind the refrain from Archie Rice's theme song, in John Osborne's 1957 play, *The Entertainer*: '*Why should I care? Why should I let it touch me?*' Sensing that this was perhaps not the setting, (or perhaps feeling myself *outnumbered*) I opted to remain silent, but heading back from Leeds on the train later that evening Archie Rice's words came back to me, as they come back to me now.

My first impressions upon reading Thompson's New Left articles of the late 1950s and early 1960s were perhaps not unlike his own upon encountering the nineteenth-century writings of William Morris: 'I was seized by... [him]. I thought, why is this man thought to be an old fuddy-duddy? He is right with us still.'[1] Correspondingly, if, at times, in the foregoing account I have appeared to privilege Thompson's analysis and understandings of the British 'new left experience', it is mainly because I believe he remains its most tenacious and perspicacious chronicler from the moment of its emergence in the mid-1950s, to its apparent breakdown at the end of the 1970s. Between these dates Thompson was driven, sometimes to the point of mania, by a need to recapitulate what he saw as the 'agenda of 1956' – both its strengths and deficiencies, its insights and implications, as well as its remaining areas of ambiguity and contradiction; as he once admitted himself, 'the return to that moment in the past has been, with me, obsessional.'[2] Where necessary, I have tried to point out where I believe this 'obsession', may have skewed his capacity to assimilate some of the subsequent cultural, political and intellectual mutations of that original agenda, or at the very least, his ability to communicate his assessment of these mutations in productive ways. As I attempted to show in Chapter Five, Thompson was more than aware of his deficiencies on this score; there was he acknowledged, 'perhaps too much sensibility mixed up with my thought – a relapse into an "English idiom" which may confuse international exchanges'; he thus tended to see his assessments less as final judgements, than as part of an ongoing conversation or dialogue, through which deeper understandings, or 'new ways of seeing' might yet be discovered. [3]

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[1] Quoted in Abelove et al, *Visions of History*, p. 13.
[2] Thompson, 'The Poverty of Theory', p. 384.
[3] E. P. Thompson, 'Foreword', in Thompson, *Poverty of Theory*, p. *iii*.

Commenting, in 1994, on the number of his obituarists who had recourse to fall back on the most famous line from *The Making of the English Working Class*, Perry Anderson noted that whilst Thompson's explicatory riff on 'the enormous condescension of posterity' was rightly considered as amongst the historian's 'most poignant and programmatic' statements, there was now a 'risk' that 'by dint of repetition' it was latterly becoming simply another 'PC tag'; as Anderson pointed out, few twentieth-century intellectuals could have striven to be more 'politically incorrect' than Thompson, who 'rejoiced in irreverence'; thus, perhaps a more fitting tribute to his legacy would be 'to take after him, where we can.'[4]

Ironically, today, it is Thompson himself who stands in need of 'rescuing', if not from the 'enormous *condescension* of posterity', then from the equally vast *contraction* of posterity's conceptual and imaginative scope. In recent years Thompson's reputation appears to be enjoying something of a renaissance: the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Making* in 2013 saw a number of specially convened events, journal retrospectives, and conferences, most of which paid generous (if qualified) tribute to Thompson's exceptional contribution to History over the previous five decades. Invariably, however, it was very much Thompson the *historian* – isolated from his 'political' commitments and identifications – who was commemorated; thus a feature in *The Guardian* newspaper by the historian Emma Griffin centring on the 'unconventional' life of *The Making*'s maker, offered no sense of Thompson's parallel efforts – at the very time the book was being written – to forge a New Left.[5]

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[4] Anderson, 'In Memoriam', p. 183.

[5] See Emma Griffin, 'E. P. Thompson: The Unconventional Historian', in *The Guardian*, 'Review' section, (March 9th 2013), p. 16. Amongst other things, Griffin erroneously tell us that Thompson was *the* 'founder of the Communist Party Historian's Group', before he became, 'part of the mass exodus from the party in the 1950s following the Soviet invasion of Hungary'. Leaving little doubt as to her own political and historical sensibilities, *The Making*, Griffin informs us, stemmed from a time 'when Marxist intellectuals could still believe that a realistic alternative to capitalism existed, could still argue that 'true' Marxism hadn't been tried properly.' Given her concluding assertion that 'Thompson's scholarship was partial and driven by his politics', it seems necessary to point out that Griffin's own work has entailed what might be considered an equally 'partial' and politically-revisionist reading of the supposedly 'positive' and 'emancipatory' effects of British industrialisation for working people in the eighteenth and nineteenth century – a thesis about which, one suspects, Thompson himself would have had much to say. (See Emma Griffin, *Liberty's Dawn: A People's History of the Industrial Revolution* (London 2013)

The Changing Nature of History

It is perhaps not surprising to find that the eclipse of radical leftist hopes in the last decades of the twentieth century has been closely paralleled by what some have interpreted as an equivalent contraction in the humanistic scope and ambition of history itself. As Terry Eagleton posed the question in 2000: 'Is the left in retreat… because history is going downhill, or is it the other way round?'[6] Speaking to the editors of *NLR* in January 2010, Eric Hobsbawm, observed that '[since the 1980s] the big, transformative questions have generally been forgotten by historians.'[7]

> The historians who came out of '68 were no longer interested in the big questions – they thought they'd all been answered. They were much more interested in the voluntary or personal aspects… I don't think the new types of history have produced any dramatic changes… There may be the occasional very good work but it's not the same.[8]

During the same period, Hobsbawm suggested, we have also seen a vast increase in 'fanzine history', which, he claimed, 'groups write in order to feel better about themselves.' [9] In the contemporary world, Hobsbawm concluded, 'people [are] not interested in what happened, but in what makes us feel good.'[10]

Similarly, in the introduction to his 2008 collection, *Reappraisals*: *Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, the late Tony Judt suggested that instead of attempting to understand or learn from the developments of our recent past we seem to imagine ourselves as somehow temporally and spiritually detached from them.[11] Indeed, in Judt's assessment, 'we have become stridently insistent – in our economic calculations, our political practices, our international strategies, even our educational priorities – that *the past has nothing of interest to teach us*. Ours, we insist, is a new

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[6] Terry Eagleton, 'Defending Utopia', in *New Left Review*, No. 4 [Series II] (July-August 2000), p. 173.

[7] Eric Hobsbawm, 'World Distempers: An Interview with Eric Hobsbawm', in *New Left Review*, Series II, No. 61 (January – February 2010), p. 149.

[8] Ibid., p. 148.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., p. 149.

[11] Judt, of course, is himself one of the few historians to have offered an integrative thematic account of the post-war period, in *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (London & New York 2010).

world; its risks and opportunities are without precedent.'[12] Equally as pernicious for Judt, however, was the way in which the recent past seemed to be becoming utilised as a kind of multi-purpose scapegoat, onto which politicians, interest groups, cultural minorities, and private individuals alike can ascribe whatever contemporary deficiency or dissatisfaction they happen to be experiencing:

> [W]e encourage citizens and students to see the past – and its lessons – through the particular vector of their own suffering (or that of their ancestors). Today the 'common' interpretation of the recent past is thus composed of the manifold fragments of separate pasts, each of them… marked by its own distinctive and assertive victimhood. [13]

One exception to the generally anodyne memorialisation of Thompson's intellectual legacy came from Owen Holland and Eoin Phillips: whilst they acknowledged that Thompson still 'stands like a towering bastard of English historical writing', they questioned whether the full meaning of his activist intellectual life had not been lost on an increasingly target-driven 'academic culture' which, amongst other things, 'stifles' the kind of polemical exposition at which Thompson excelled 'in the name of a sinewy kind of consensualism'.[14] Indeed, like Judt and Hobsbawm before them, Holland and Phillips also expressed concern about 'the gulf that [now] exists between the engaged public intellectual and the diligent academic (or scholar) so caught up in the writing of his or her next monograph that the world passes largely unheeded.'[15] For a period in the 1960s and 1970s, they suggested, intellectuals like Thompson (and, one is tempted to add, Hall, Williams, Samuel et al) appeared to have 'collapsed this dichotomy', not by writing 'popular history' but by making 'history popular'; today, in contrast, they concluded, '*Academicus Supercilious*' reigns (almost supreme)', a sad denouement of the earlier generation's struggle to move beyond the reductive interpretative frameworks of the predominant culture, as well as one that is arguably now yielding increasingly diminishing returns.[16] As Holland and Phillips note 'no more can academics afford to see themselves as part of a cosseted aristocracy

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[12] Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections On the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (London 2008), p. 2.
[13] Judt, *Reappraisals*, p. 5.
[14] Owen Holland & Eoin Phillips, 'Fifty Years of E. P. Thompson's The Making of the English Working Class: Some Field Notes', in *Social History*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (Summer, 2014), p. 179.
[15] Ibid., p. 172.
[16] Ibid., p. 180.

of labour – if they ever did'; the social, cultural and political terrain which might have facilitated such an assumption is itself 'undergoing a process of rapid dissolution.'[17] Not least, 'the social', 'public' space of the university is being subjected to the privations of thoughtless privatisation, even as 'privacy' itself is being relentlessly whittled away by 'new modalities knowledge transfer, as the jargon has it.'[18]

Not all practitioners see history's future in such bleak terms. As Penny Summerfield has happily observed:

> The vitality of history in museums and the media is very striking. Aside from well known telly dons, history is kept in popular focus by numerous film and television dramatisations of period novels and autobiographies, and many historical reconstructions and documentaries. And it is very much social history that is represented.[19]

Nevertheless, assessments from the other side of the 'two cultures', however, present a rather less optimistic impression:

> By most accounts, the humanities are in trouble. University programmes are downsizing, the next generation of scholars is un- or underemployed, morale is sinking, students are staying away in droves… Several university presidents and provosts have lamented to me that when a scientist comes into their office, it's to announce some exiting new research opportunity and demand the resource to pursue it. When a humanities scholar drops by, it's to plead for respect for the way things have always been done.[20]

For Pinker, this 'crisis' in the humanities is something about which '[n]o thinking person should be indifferent'; indeed, in his opinion literature, sociology and, above all, history itself, are 'indispensable to a civilized democracy'. At the same time, however, Pinker insists that contemporary votaries of the humanities must also bear some of the responsibility for the 'damage' inflicted to their respective disciplines

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Penny Summerfield, 'A Message from Penny Summerfield', Social History Society Website, http://www.socialhistory.org.uk, accessed 1 April 2013.
[20] Steven Pinker, 'Science Is Not Your Enemy', in *New Republic*, 6 August 2013, http://www.newrepublic.com/article/114127/science-not-enemy-humanities [accessed 5 Nov. 2014].

over the past three to four decades. Above all, in his view: 'The humanities have yet to recover from the disaster of postmodernism, with its defiant obscurantism, dogmatic relativism, and suffocating political correctness. And *they* have failed to define a progressive agenda.'[21]

This is of course a familiar line of thinking. Indeed, it is one that echoes Thompson's own misconceived opposition between the 'precious historical moment' of '1956', and the universally bad 'moment of '1968''. Like the structuralisms of Louis Althusser, the cultural radicalisms of the 'sixty-eighters' and, indeed, new leftism itself, postmodernism is not one thing. Pinker's implication that all that is now required in order to ensure the revivification of the humanities is for 'right-minded' historians, philosophers, novelists, literary theorists, linguists, sociologists, anthropologists etc, to wipe the slate clean of the last thirty or forty years of epistemological discussion and debate (or should I say 'discourse'?) is like wanting to take contemporary biology back to the *Origin of Species*. If the foregoing history – or indeed, the history of the twentieth century in general – suggests anything, it is that once certain 'boxes' have been opened – no matter how unsettling or inconvenient their contents – it is unlikely we will ever be able to quite close them again. The various postmodernisms that have emerged over the last four decades are indispensable to anyone seeking to challenge the prevailing narratives, pragmatisms, structures, ideologies, common senses within which are obliged to orientate ourselves.

Resisting Ideology

As we have seen, the contestable claims of 'present realities' – including those of so-called 'pragmatic', 'expedient', or 'common-sense' political thinking – were, of course, something that new leftists from the late 1950s onwards consistently sought to both demystify and *historicise*. Indeed, arguably it was the dawning recognition amongst certain new-left thinkers that the initial 'break with Stalinism' would be merely the *first* step in a necessary, continuing and perhaps endless 'process' of intellectual, cultural and ideological 'break-out' that, gave *new* leftism its distinctively contemporary radical remit. If nothing else, new leftists recognised that in an age in

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[21] Ibid.

which the technological means and capacity to destroy human civilization itself were become increasingly ubiquitous, *resisting* ideology was more than just a moral or intellectual obligation, it was also an *existential* one.

We cannot simply turn our eyes to the past, seek out a ready-made idea, programme or theory, and apply it as a universal fixative to our own contemporary woes and worries. We are obliged to live *now*, we have to address our own times with humility and intelligence, to look at its contradictions and possibilities. As Hall once put it, 'the politics of infinitely advancing while looking over the shoulder is a very dangerous exercise. You tend to fall in a hole.'[22] As it was, one of Hall's last major political interventions was an exposition on the various ways that 'neo-liberalism' seeks to 'disseminate', 'legitimate', and 'reinvigorate' its 'regime of power, profit and privilege', through a parallel 'hegemonic' programme of social, cultural and historical normalisation.   Indeed, one of the key strategic objectives of the so-called 'Kilburn Manifesto' initiative is to challenge what its founders' regard as a prevailing orthodoxy amongst social and political commentators that the developments of the last three decades have emerged simply as the result of the 'inexorable laws of history'. As Hall himself insisted in 2013: Such developments were not 'inevitable' but arose as an 'outcome' of '[c]onflicts between social settlements… [and] contending social forces.'

One of the most tangible aims of the so-called 'culturalist' New Left associated with late 1950s and early 1960s was to attempt to break-down what it saw as the arbitrary divisions and distances between different social groups and identities – principally those based on 'class' and 'generation', though, latterly, also those formulated around gender, sexuality and race. Central to this effort was a recognition of the need to *empower* groups and individuals who had, for whatever nefarious reason, been historically denied either the right, or opportunity, to express themselves in public political discourse.

If we accept that at least one strain of new leftism in Britain was compelled by the possibility of establishing some form of national 'common cultural space' in which

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[22] Hall, 'Minimal Selves', in Homi Bhaba et al (ed.), *Identity: The Real Me* (London, 1987) p. 44.

'Dons and coalminers' might share in (and *learn* from) the same cultural and aesthetic experiences, it is hard not to conclude that the last three decades of British national cultural development have suggested anything other the continuing contraction of this 'space', as well as the egalitarian and humanist principles which underpinned it. Indeed, in this sense, the *new*-leftist cultural epoch I have attempted to evoke here now looks increasingly like an isolated (and, now, largely *submerged*) island of so-called 'high' and 'popular' cultural convergence, surrounded by, on one side, a vast ocean of patrician elitism and cultural segregation, and, on the other, the ever-rising waters of commercialised 'mass' cultural degeneration.

An ironic consequence of the more assertive militant form 'identity politics' associated with the later 1960s and 1970s is to have effectively denied the possibility of any meaningful *collective* dialogue *between* such identities and groups. Individuals now not only 'wear' their 'identities' as a form of self-assertion, but also, increasingly, as a form of *defence* – one through which they might evade the 'external' judgements, criticisms and attacks of 'outsiders'. Whilst there are, of course, multiple important reasons for insisting that no white British national be qualified to enter a discussion on black British; or that no male pass comment on the meaning of contemporary feminism, there is a considerable problem if the only individuals deemed qualified… Indeed, a 'toleration' of this sort is ultimately likely to silence, as much as it *facilitates*, meaningful social discourse – 'to each his own wilderness'.

How – one is compelled to ask – are progressive, radical and humanistic thinkers to maintain anything like a Gramscian 'optimism of the will' in the face of all this? Surely the accompanying tsunami of 'pessimism' is enough to overwhelm any of us. As the academic, writer, and former 'sixty-eighter', Marina Warner, has recently put it: 'I'm heartbroken that we were defeated, politically, culturally. I'm also sad for the next generation' – ' [but] nobody with any kind of sophistication [today]' could possibly entertain the 'kind of hopefulness, the energy that buoyed one up in those days… You can't believe there is something to be done that can be done by *you*.'

A Sense of History

It is all too easy for a generation born in the immediate aftermath of the radical political, cultural and intellectual struggles described here to view such claims as simply the solipsistic lamentations of an ageing sixty-eighter. Nevertheless, as Thompson once observed: 'To despair is to suffer, and we may not accuse a man for his suffering. Least of all may we do so when we have not shared his sequence of tragic experience. All we can do is to reason.'[23]

In some sense the historical ignorance and *conceit* of every emerging young generation is essential. Indeed, to this extent inter-generational antagonisms are not only inevitable, it is also *vital*; it is what ensures the dialectic continues. We must *fail* to heed, or respect, the 'lessons' of our historical forebears, or at least to accept their 'understandings' in such terms. Every generation is, to some extent, obliged to improvise its own 'agenda' – to respond to the distinctive conditions and challenges with which it has been presented, formulate its own meanings and understandings, and its own reasons for seeking to carry the movement of history forward. As Dennis Potter once observed, whilst 'piety' can be 'a useful preserving fluid for embalming the past', one of the most important and 'noblest tasks of the popular historian should be to make us ashamed of our forefathers': Only '[i]n this way', Potter suggested, can we who are currently living be in a position to 'fracture the tyranny of their legacies' in order to 'examine our own conduct in a longer, clearer and [if necessary] harsher perspective.'[24]

In later years, both Thompson and Hobsbawm would seek to explain the apparent doggedness of their own enduring political commitments and allegiances – in the wake of what many would claim as relentless and irrefutable contradictory evidence – as stemming, at least in part, from an unwillingness to dishonour the memory of all those men and women, throughout history (in some cases, their personal friends, comrades and relations), who had sacrificed so much in the hope of building a better future, not just for themselves, but for *all* humanity. As Thompson put it in 1973 – a time which itself gave little reason for optimism on this score – he still wished to

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[23] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 131.
[24] Potter, 'The Merciless Retribution of Posterity', p. 21.

'justify the aspirations of those whom 'history', at this point of time appears to have refuted', if only because so 'many of those whom 'reality' has proved to be wrong, still seem to have been better people than those who were, with a facile and conformist realism, right.'[25] Equally for Hobsbawm – whose decision not to follow the route taken by the majority of his fellow British Marxist historians in 1956 and abandon his Communist Party membership remains controversial to this day – the allegiance was ultimately *personal*; he 'stayed' out of 'a sense of personal loyalty… to those who had sacrificed their lives and lost'.[26]

To a later generation, such allegiances based on may seem at best sentimental, if not pathologically *delusional*: As Jenny Turner, suggested in her review of Michael Kenny's *The First New Left* in 1995: 'Thirty, nearly forty years on, it seems extraordinary that anyone ever invested faith in any political party, any geopolitical space in the way communists before 1956 invested their all in the Soviet Union and the CP.'[27]As Hall observed: 'Hundred-and-one percent commitment is no longer possible.'[28] Nor should this 'loss' be regretted. The in-built tendency to dogmatism, zealotry of such totalising ideological or religious belief or commitment remains one of the gravest human threats. Indeed, if we are to survive, the willingness to reformulate, revise, and, if necessary abandon altogether, our own historic misconceptions and distortions, our prejudices and presumptions, our mistaken allegiances and commitments – no matter how noble, consoling or empowering they may have once appeared – is indispensable.

Ultimately, however, the moral and political commitments of figures like Thompson and Hobsbawm were underpinned, and sustained, by something far more potent and powerful than mere sentimentality, or nostalgia, for an historic and discredited 'lost cause'. Their knowledge of history convinced them that no past was ever fully lost or dead. We cannot, no matter how much we wish to, live in spite of history. Its terms of address, what Marx called its 'borrowed language', its presumptions, its values and its tragedies, have colonised themselves within us in ways that by the very nature of how

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[25] Thompson, 'Open Letter', p. 186.
[26] Quoted in *The Late Show*, special edition marking the publication of Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes*, (BBC 2, 24 October 1994), available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nnd2Pu9NNPw, first accessed 17 July 2014, at 1900hrs.
[27] Turner, 'Left In and Out of History', p. 6.
[28] Hall, 'Minimal Selves', p. 45.

we come to construct knowledge, we are incapable of fully comprehending. If the often tragic and tortuous trajectory of the twentieth century – 'the most terrible century in Western history' – shows us anything, it is the potentially catastrophic price that is paid by both individuals and societies when they seek to evade the past and the necessity to have our lives rooted in wider frameworks of meaning and value.

Unlike the actual past itself, the *meanings* and *interpretations* that we attach to historical developments and processes are not bound by their chronology or temporality. *History*, to put it another way, does not have a *use-by-date*. Indeed, despite certain perpetual claims to the contrary, historical processes rarely 'end' at a given moment, ceding the way for an entirely new set of conditions; most continue evolving, often proliferating out in ways that would almost certainly have been unanticipated, and perhaps even *undesirable*, to those who first initiated them. Other processes, meanwhile, can slowly become encased under mountains of critical and ideological permafrost; yet like the ancient viruses miraculously returned to life after tens of millennia frozen beneath the Siberian tundra, the possibility that a change in environmental conditions might one day yield their revivification is always there.

History has a dual nature: in one sense it is like a lava-flow, overturning, conflagrating and consuming all things that stand in the way of its relentless forward trajectory. At the same time, however, it is also akin to the ensuing ash-cloud: it envelops us, it stifles, chokes and blinds us, and, like the ancient townspeople of Pompeii, it behoves us to keep moving if we are not to become the victims of premature petrification. If it were possible, however, to stand and look at it, we would perhaps see how that 'cloud' is nothing more than the total accumulated 'mass' of our own tired ideas and beliefs, our broken paradigms and ideological distortions, our false consolations and denials – and, perhaps, not least, our curiously persistent *nostalgia* for all of it.

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